

ALLEGORIES OF MODERNITY, GEOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY

A Dissertation

by

SEENHWA JEON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: English

Allegories of Modernity, Geographies of Memory

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ABSTRACT

Allegories of Modernity, Geographies of Memory. (August 2012)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. David McWhirter

This dissertation examines how postmodernist narratives of memory in Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* retrieve the stories of those who have been lost or forgotten in official history and refigure the temporal and spatial imaginary in intertwining personal stories of crisis with public history through acts of remembering. Questioning the modernist ideology of progress based on the idea of linear sequence of time, the novels not only retrace the heterogeneous and discontinuous layers of stories overlooked or repressed in official accounts of modern history, but also re-examine the contradictory and contested process by which subjects are situated or positioned, and its effects on the production of knowledge. These postmodern historical novels examine history as a discourse and explore its limits. The narrators of the novels are engaged with an autobiographical act of rewriting their lives, but their efforts to reconstitute themselves in unity and continuity are undermined by the disjunctive narrative form of the novels.

The layered narrative of memory through which the novels reconstruct modern history is allegorical in the double sense that it exposes the act of signification by de-

centering the symbol of the transcendental signifier while telling an allegorical story of personal and familial history that mirrors national history in a fragmented way. In *Waterland*, Tom Crick retells his personal and familial stories intertwined with local and national history as alternative history lessons and challenges the Idea of Progress by revisiting sites of traumatic memory. *Midnight's Children* constructs counter-stories of Post-Independence India as multiple alternatives to one official version of history and addresses the limits of history in terms of “a border zone of temporality.” In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator retells his family history as a story of borders through his struggle with gaps in official history and creates a national imaginary with mirror images and events. The postmodernist narrative of memory in these novels turns the time of the now into a time for the “past as to come,” a time to detect the unrealized and unfulfilled possibilities of the past, through retellings of the past.

To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At one point of my long-winded journey with this dissertation, I was surprised to find how much the topics I was struggling with turned out to be personal. This study is a result of my struggle to work through a ‘knot of meanings’ the traumatic points of my life formed. I would like to thank my advisor Dr. David McWhirter for his guidance and encouragement at every step of my journey. He never said no to me even when I presented a preposterous plan. I am also thankful to Dr. Margaret Ezell, Dr. Marian Eide, and Dr. Richard Golsan for their patience and understanding. To Dr. Marian Eide, in particular, I am thankful for encouraging me with her belief in my work. I would like to extend my thanks to Dr. James Rosenheim and the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research for generously providing me with resources and support.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: ALLEGORIES OF MODERNITY,
GEOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY

The Allegorical as a Strategy of Representation and Guiding Principle

“Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as
one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”

-Walter Benjamin

This study is a result of my continued interest in the significance of rewriting history in postmodernity at the supposed end of history. My argument is that recent English/postcolonial historical fiction, or at least a key strand of it, provides a productive response to the kinds of questions raised by the postmodern return to history and narrative, or the surge of retrospective readings of the past, at the time social and cultural transformations in a globalizing world are challenging our conceptions of historical time and space. The novels in question employ the flexible form of memory narrative as a vehicle to examine the shifting boundaries of nation, history, and identity while retelling the past from de-centered subject positions. I suggest that they are not simply “postmodernist” in their self-reflexive play with narrative form turned on questioning conventional historical writing, but present “postmodernity” as a mode of critical

This dissertation follows the style of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

thinking that, prompted by a sense of crisis, attempts to grasp the present in a meaningful structure by projecting an end to modernity.

In this study, I read these postmodernist narratives of memory as “allegories of modernity” to approach their retrospective retellings of the past in light of recent creative or critical efforts to refigure modernity from the perspective of otherness. By drawing on Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the allegorical in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and of a different conception of history in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” I develop the “allegorical” as a strategy of representation employed in certain postmodern or postcolonial novels whose retellings of the past through the act of remembering are marked by a self-reflexive questioning of the relationship between narrativity and identity. Allegory as a strategy of representation is devised to weave into stories of the past the awareness of incompleteness, of the fragmentary nature of our access to the past real. My approach to the allegorical, however, needs to be distinguished from a poststructuralist focus on the textualization of the past real.

Allegory in narrative is considered a method of stringing double meanings based on correspondences between what is being told and a set of meanings that serve as its commentary and interpretation. In its modern variation as reinvented by Benjamin, allegory reveals recognition of fundamental instability underlying the standard interpretive system: “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”¹ As such, the allegorical engages with historical traditions in a different way from the symbolic. If the symbolic erases the traces of mediation through the

¹ Walter Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: NLB, 1977. 175.

process of idealization, the allegorical demystifies the symbolic totality of history and attends to the gap between nature and culture, between what is expressed and what is communicated.

The allegorical in postmodernist narratives of memory is a mode of facing a break between a disappearing past and a present by assembling stories of the past in dispersion to form a constellation. What holds them together is the will to remember. A haunting sense of ending or crisis drives the narrators of past stories in the novels to look back and tell stories of others lost or forgotten in the narrative of modern progress. The memoirists turn into modern allegorists as their act of retrospection engages with demystifying the symbolic network of ideas that hold up the modern ideology of progress.

This study reinterprets the disjunctive principle of allegory in relation to recent critical efforts to read geography into accounts of modernity. Reading the memory texts as allegories of modernity brings back the question of place erased in the kind of thinking illustrated in Paul de Man's argument for the modernity of allegory. De Man focuses on time as "the originary constitutive category" when he suggests that allegory "designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin."² The temporal distance cannot be transcended, as an allegorical sign refers to but can never coincide with a previous sign. To de Man, this awareness of a temporal aporia marks a modern consciousness. The allegorical as a strategy of representation questions the abstract and universal terms of this temporal aporia by detecting the haunting presence of an alterity

² Paul de Man. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd Ed. London: Methuen, 1983. 207.

in the place of the origin. Allegories of modernity, then, turn the gap between allegorical signs into a fertile site for alternative constellations of cultural significations. This study is indebted to postcolonial critics, whose main concern is with challenging the totalizing conception of historical time in quest of alternate stories of modernity, in reading the ways in which allegories of modernity problematize the ‘now’ of modernity by retelling national history as stories of the border.

The sense of ending that looms over recent English/postcolonial historical fiction is related to the sense that the Empire or the nation, the symbolic center supposed to hold things together, is falling apart in the postcolonial globalizing world. The memoirists revisit the past with the urgency of retrieving lost images of the past as present through memory in the threat of postmodern oblivion. The act of retrospection in allegories of modernity, however, is not a nostalgic turn to seek an idealized past, but rather an attempt to revisit past events and objects as reconfigured through the perspective of the present. The perspective of the present is itself destabilized, as what forms the present is subject to the question of place as implied in the notion of constellation.

The allegorical also designates the distinctive ways these retellings of the past intertwine personal stories with national history to de-center official history from the perspective of otherness. They present alternate stories of the past in retelling familial history which mirrors national history but in a fragmented way. As Amitav Ghosh wrote in a correspondence with the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, writing about families is a way of “displacing” the nation. This study examines the narratives of memory centered on familial history in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s*

Children, and Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* to see how the allegorical stories told by post-imperial or post-colonial melancholic subjects disrupt the boundaries of identity by dwelling on the relationship between memory and place. These disjunctive narratives of memory show how the narrators in crisis find spaces of and for the other suppressed in the narrative of modernity as progress to form gaps in their traumatic memories.

Reading these novels together also opens a view to legacies of the British Empire, which haunt English and postcolonial identities as specters invisible but still effective in postimperial sites and decolonized nations. Allegories of modernity retrace the shadow lines of history and geography and show that a metropolitan center and distant territories are interconnected through "intertwined and overlapping histories"³ as Edward Said puts it. Ghosh uses the metaphor of the mirror for the looking-glass border between India and Pakistan. The postmodernist narratives of memory assemble the traces of imperial legacies to delineate "a spectral contact zone, created by the phantom border of the mirror, indiscriminate but ultimately revealing,"⁴ for the metaphoric boundaries of identity.

The narrators in the novels are storytellers as much as modern allegorists, bent on weaving a web of genealogies. A continual yearning runs through their retellings of the past but in a sort of creative tension between memory and hope, between nostalgia and utopianism. Benjaminian storytellers, they are men who transmit counsel in the form of

³ Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. 18.

⁴ Bill Ashcroft. "Beyond the Nation: Post-Colonial Hope." *The Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* 1 (2009): 20.

story. And there lies a possibility for hope with these melancholic subjects bound for no transcendental home.

This study attempts to construct a constellation of related theoretical issues and critical responses from different positions by reading them as open to interpretations varying according to the kind and place of a question asked. The allegorical thus guides my reading of selected postmodern historical novels. “Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars.”⁵ The question of place brings the perspective of otherness into this nostalgic picture of pre-modern times when the stars served as transcendental guides, and we are invited to re-map alternative paths from our places in which we are at home and not at home at the same time.

Postmodern Retrospections and the “Past as to Come”

Twilight is that moment of the day that foreshadows the night of forgetting, but that seems to slow time itself, an in-between state in which the last light of the day may still play out its ultimate marvels. It is memory’s privileged time.

- Andreas Huyssen

A sense of ending looms large in most discourses on postmodernity. While addressing the issue of postmodernity in different views and from different positions, they share a strategy of reading symptoms of transition in social and cultural space by proclaiming the end of modernity whether in a tone celebratory or apocalyptic. The

⁵ Georg Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Ann Bostock. London: Merlin Press, 1970. 29

rhetoric of “end” is featured loudly in Fredric Jameson’s famous essay on postmodernism: genuine historicity as the “retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future” disappears in the postmodern age characterized by the loss of depth as manifested in the death of the subject, the consumerist addiction to images and spectacles, and textualization of the outside world. In this new historical situation, “we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.”⁶ In his 2003 essay on the postmodern Jameson even goes further to proclaim the end not only of genuine historicity, but also of temporality itself, as he argues the spatial becomes a dominant mode in the postmodern.⁷

Underneath such a strategy of reading signs of change with a sense of ending may lie a desire to grasp the meaning of the present through narrative as Frank Kermode outlines the temporal signification of narrative in fiction: “We project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle.” Projecting an end or a beginning with a sense of crisis is an attempt to “make sense of the past as of a book or a psalm we have read or recited, and of the present as a book the seals of which we shall see opened.”⁸ Or, as Hayden White puts it, there is an allegorical impulse or desire to moralize reality by

⁶ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 18-25.

⁷ Fredric Jameson. "The End of Temporality." *Critical Inquiry* 29.4 (2003): 695-718.

⁸ Frank Kermode. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 8, 96.

imposing a structure or an order of meaning on the real events from a certain culture-specific perspective.⁹

The privileged position of a knowing subject at the present time is assumed in the act of projecting an end as an attempt to grasp the meaning of the historical real through narrative. In Hegel's famous trope for philosophical wisdom achieved at the end of history, historical self-understanding emerges belatedly at the dusk of an age: "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk."¹⁰ Jameson's position in his lamenting diagnosis of the end of history in the postmodern age, however, is not that of simply reversing the so-called Hegelian historicism whose teleological view of history affirms the present order as the 'end.' In his critical negotiations with post-structuralist polemics to reformulate the terms of grounding our act of reading and interpreting literary texts in history as the ultimate horizon, Jameson points out that historicist practice has involved an allegorical act in representing History itself as synchronically whole and diachronically linear. The vision of linear history is based on a certain version of narrative that interconnects historical events and periods in a seamless sequence while History is "fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational" like the unconscious in psychoanalysis. As with Lacan's notion of the Real that resists symbolization

⁹ See Hayden V. White. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. 20-21.

¹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Trans. T. M. Knox. New York: Oxford UP, 1967. 13.

absolutely, our representation of history always involves some ideological investment in the form of our imaginary relationship to realities.¹¹

The urge for retrospective readings of the past at the dusk of the twentieth century manifests itself as increasing obsessions with memory—what Andreas Huyssen calls “twilight memories.” According to Huyssen, the term points to a double problematic: the surge of memory in various social, cultural, and material forms when postmodern amnesia threatens to prevail as generational memories disappear at the falling of the centennial dusk, and the twilight status of memory as the act of remembering is concerned with a fissure between the past and the present—“the fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation.”¹² How can we read this memory boom as a cultural phenomenon which is taking place when the waning of history and historical consciousness is lamented?

Linda Hutcheon makes a similar point in her readings of postmodernist novels that are “historically engaged, problematically referential.” Hutcheon focuses on their paradoxical move to problematize the basic assumptions of historical knowledge while recuperating historical contexts. With the newly coined term, “historiographic metafiction,” she highlights their self-reflexive approach to history and fiction as cultural constructs: any access to the past real as always implicated in our cultural representations and discursive practices. In this regard, the postmodern return to history, Hutcheon argues, is not simply a reactionary or nostalgic gesture, but a critical revisiting

¹¹ Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981. 27-9, 82.

¹² Andreas Huyssen. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 1-9.

of the past with ironic distance. Hutcheon thus turns our attention to the critical side of postmodernism against its detractors by reformulating the paradoxes or contradictions of the postmodern in its ambivalent relation to the conventional distinction of modernist aestheticism and realist representation.¹³

In a critical examination of specific contexts and constellations of culture in the historical trajectory of modernism and postmodernism, Huyssen also tries to differentiate the critical strain of “an alternative postmodernism” from the affirmative kind that falls in line with political neo-conservatism in its aestheticism as well as from various forms of modernism. His approach to the critical potential of postmodernism is based on a dialectical perspective on the dynamics of cultural practices, in which a culture is grasped “in its gains as well as in its losses, in its promises as well as in its depravations.” What distinguishes postmodernism from modernism in its diverse spectrum, Huyssen argues, is the former’s departure from the teleology and ideology of modernization in which the latter, with all its adversary positions, had been caught. The “postmodernism of resistance” as Huyssen puts it reappropriates many of modernism’s aesthetic strategies and techniques in new socio-cultural constellations and operates in a field of tension where we can rethink the oppositional terms embedded in the ideology of modernity such as tradition and innovation, mass culture and high art, progress and reaction, modernism and realism.¹⁴

¹³ Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. 268.

¹⁴ Andreas Huyssen. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 188, 200, 220.

A sense of belated self-understanding, a sense shared with poststructuralist questionings of the basic assumptions of modernist thinking, lurks in revisions of the historical past in the critical strain of postmodernism. Poststructuralism, “an *archeology of modernity*, a theory of modernism at the stage of its exhaustion,” works itself out in certain postmodernist works as “a retrospective reading which, in some cases, is fully aware of modernism’s limitations and failed political ambitions.” Such retrospective readings at the twilight time, “memory’s privileged time,” of the twentieth century are performed in a unique constellation with the emerging problematic of otherness in the cultural sphere. Various and multiple forms of otherness based on differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, class and gender, and temporal and spatial locations challenge the centered and linear vision of “a world-scale drama played out on the European and American stage, with mythic man as its hero and with modern art as a driving force.”¹⁵ What we see here is a unique conjuncture of an archeological revision of modernity from its belated self-understanding and a genealogical search for alternate stories in refigured historical constellations. In other words, a retrospective configuration of modernity is accompanied by a critical attention to the internal tensions and resistances of cultural space which tend to be erased in the teleological vision of culture and history based on the sense of unity and continuity. As Huyssen suggests, then, what is disappearing at the dusk of the twentieth century is not temporality itself, but a certain kind of temporal thinking in which “the move from the past to the future has been linked

¹⁵ Ibid. 209, 217.

to notions of progress and perfectibility in social and human affairs that characterize the age of modernity as a whole.”¹⁶

In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault defines genealogy as an analysis of descent opposed to the evolutionary model of history whose main focus is on the search for origins: genealogy liberates what has been forgotten or lost in the continuum of history and what has been set aside as accidents or errors in the imposed order of historical necessity. This genealogical approach with its task of tracing “passing events in their proper dispersions” questions a “suprahistorical perspective” that assumes a teleological movement of events in the homogenized form of time.¹⁷ It is no wonder that Foucault’s conception of genealogy resembles the Benjaminian sense of history as a constellation of “time filled by the presence of the now.”¹⁸ Wary of the kind of historicism that follows the footsteps of victors in history in the name of progress, Walter Benjamin attempts to conceive of a historical materialism that distances itself from the positivistic understanding of the past. A sense of crisis underlies Benjamin’s call for a different conception of history as every image of the past will disappear unless it is not “recognized by the present as one of its own concerns.” As Foucault suggests in his argument for effective history, knowledge as perspective is affirmed when Benjamin recognizes the issue of cultural hegemony in the preservation and transmission of traditions: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a

¹⁶ Ibid. 8.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 81.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. 261.

document of barbarism.”¹⁹ To question the conception of time as homogeneous and empty is then to recognize violence forgotten at the origins of historical tradition built on the sense of unity and continuity.

In his Foucauldian approach to a complex interaction between the present place of a knowing subject and the past as the object of its inquiry, Michel de Certeau turns attention to the process of “making” history, in which historical facts, not givens but products, implicate historical “acts” with certain choices and interpretations involved. “Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice,” he argues, “history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice.” As the boundaries of modern history are established through acts of differentiation and exclusion, Certeau redefines history as “a work on the margins” from the perspective of a heterology, a discourse on the other. A heterological perspective places discursivity in its relation to an eliminated other and attends to the tension within historiography between the real and discourse. In such a perspective, the past real as the object of history is not only constituted as a “realistic effect.” While we access the past real always mediated through textualized remains or historical layers of interpretation, the figure of the past also refers to “the unspoken element implied by the closure of the discourse.” What remains unspoken, silenced, or excluded shadows forth through “shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication,”

¹⁹ Ibid. 255-56.

which perturb the neat order of a historical narrative and leave “rifts and crannies” on the edges of discourse.²⁰

Certeau underscores the particularity of historical discourses: “while these discourses speak *of* history, they are already situated *in* history.”²¹ Hayden White also historicizes the relationship between narrativity and historicity by examining three different forms of historical representation—the annals, the chronicle, and the history proper. White contests the structuralist assumption of narrative as a universal, transcultural meta-code, arguing that the principle of selectivity and exclusion operates in every narrative. The different forms of history are products of particular conceptions of historical reality, and then certain culture-specific perspectives and judgments are written into narrative constructs. There is an allegorical impulse in every historical narrative to weave real events with no formal coherency into a coherent plot with certain moral order. But the coherency is constructed “on the basis of a set of events that might have been included but were left out.” The moral order that weaves a narrative according to the idea of identity and continuity is then put into question to disclose a culture-specific perspective and possibilities for different versions of narration hidden under the seemingly full account of history.²²

In the dynamic of historiographical process, which Certeau describes as “a return of the repressed, that is, a return of what, at a given moment, has *become* unthinkable in order for a new identity to *become* thinkable,”²³ a place for a future is inscribed as a lack

²⁰ Michel de Certeau. *The Writing of History*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. 36, 40, 44.

²¹ Ibid. 20.

²² White. 10.

²³ De Certeau. *The Writing of History*. 4.

which signifies possibilities for a new identity. The time structure is turned around when Slavoj Žižek approaches the process in terms of “a symbolization, a symbolic integration of meaningless imaginary traces.”²⁴ The discovery of the possibilities is always retrospective as a new signifier is advanced to change the meaning of the past by restructuring the system of interpretations and opening up the frame of historical tradition for new readings. More rigorously speaking, the meaning of the unspoken traced in a historical narrative is not “discovered” from the past, but always constituted retrospectively; the repressed returns not from the past, but from the future. This retrospective act of rewriting history is described as follows;

The past exists as it is included, as it enters (into) the synchronous net of the signifier—that is, as it is symbolized in the texture of the historical memory—and that is why we are all the time ‘rewriting history,’ retroactively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures—it is this elaboration which decides retroactively what they ‘will have been.’²⁵

However, there is a traumatic point, a non-symbolized real, which resists this retroactive working through, elaboration of the past. As a ‘knot of meanings,’ or an event susceptible to more than one version of narration as White puts it, the traumatic event marks the limits of historical narrativization—the limits of retroactively modifying the past, of placing the past in the symbolic network in Žižek’s terms.

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989. 55.

²⁵ Ibid. 56.

Benjamin's angel of history epitomizes the dilemma of a modern man as it keeps its eyes on the scene of a past while being swept toward the future by a storm called progress.

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.²⁶

His wings caught by the wind from "Paradise," he is pulled toward the teleological end of a utopian promise. But his gaze is fixed on "one single catastrophe," which cannot be seen in its totality but only in fragments. The fragmentary traces of a catastrophic historical event seems to suggest the epistemological limit of representing the past real which can be accessed only through its textualized remains. In terms of the transference

²⁶ Benjamin. 257-8.

Zizek suggests takes place in the retroactive process of symbolization, what we call the journey into the past being in fact the journey into the future, the limit itself becomes part of the process. The retroactive elaboration leaves a pile of debris, “wreckage upon wreckage,” the left-over of a traumatic event not assimilated into the symbolic network, or “remainders left aside by an explication” in Certeau’s terms.

The picture can be read as an allegory of a modern subject vacillating between a nostalgic desire to restore the past and a utopian command to move forward. Critics point out that the nostalgic desire to restore the past, a distinctly modern phenomenon, is not simply antithetical to the idea of progress in that both are derived from the modern conception of time as irreversible. “The modern time of progress and the anti-modern time of ‘tradition,’” Bruno Latour states, “are twins who failed to recognize one another: The idea of an identical repetition of the past and that of a radical rupture with any past are two symmetrical results of a single conception of time.”²⁷ If both the nostalgic longing and the idea of progress are dependent on the modern conception of irreversible time, Benjamin’s angel of history points to another allegorical reading of the present as historical time. An historical emotion born out of the modern experience of dislocation and instability, the nostalgic longing for an imaginary time or place of plenitude is a sign of discontent with the present. Although nostalgia is oftentimes denounced as reactionary or regressive, the imagined past in nostalgic yearning mirrors the imagined future in utopian thinking in that both are a projection of the desire for a time and place different from that of the present condition. Fredric Jameson points out, “there is no

²⁷ Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. 157.

reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other.”²⁸

The nostalgic way of thinking about modernity is criticized for its essentialist assumption of a realm of immediacy and plenitude in the vanishing past. What is ironical in this nostalgic essentialism is that the realm of authenticity obtains its reality through proclamation of its loss. In other words, the past that the nostalgic seek never was but is realized through a nostalgic recognition that it is lost. Susan Stewart points out, “Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack.” Discontented with the present, nostalgia turns its utopian face toward a past which acquires the status of authenticity through its absence—“a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality.”²⁹

The retrospective move in the critical strain of postmodernism, on which this project focuses, needs to be differentiated from the kind of nostalgic essentialism that erases the structure of writing inscribed in the act of remembering. Pierre Nora’s distinction between true memory and “memory transformed by its passage through history” illustrates the nostalgic thinking about modernity. Authentic memory, rooted in the peasant culture, is supposed to evoke the past into presence while history, a realm of writing, is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no

²⁸ Fredric Jameson. *Marxism and Form; Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972. 82.

²⁹ Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. 23.

longer.”³⁰ True memory, a counterpart to unmediated lived experience, is always presented as lost in the vanishing past. Such a distinction seems to resonate with Benjamin’s nostalgic outline of the dying art of storytelling and the disappearance of lived experience as its source in his essay on the storyteller. Far from a simple denial of the deficient present, however, Benjamin’s attitude toward the disappearance is more complex and ambivalent: he does not see it merely as a symptom of historical decline or progress, but as part of a specific historical process in which narrative has been separated from the realm of living speech. In his self-conscious nostalgia, Benjamin is aware that what he sees in the vanishing art of storytelling is not the discovery of its true value as it was, but “a new beauty in what is vanishing.” In other words, the meaning is projected retrospectively through a perspective made possible by its disappearance and the advent of new forms. And there resides the very significance of narrativity: when “experience that is passed on from mouth to mouth” is replaced by information, the novel still confers the “meaning of life,” which the reader cannot find in the perplexity of living his unfinished life, in recounting what has been.³¹ In this sense, as David Lowenthal puts it, what we are nostalgic for is “the condition of having been, with a concomitant integration and completeness lacking in any present.”³²

Paul Ricoeur examines the fictional narrative’s use of “the condition of having been” in terms of the quasi-historical: narratives use the past tense in recounting

³⁰ Pierre Nora. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” Trans. Marc Roudebush. *Representations* 26 (1989): 13.

³¹ Walter Benjamin. “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. 87, 84, 100.

³² David Lowenthal. “Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn’t.” *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*. Ed. Malcolm C. a. C. Shaw. New York: Manchester UP, 1989. 29.

something, and in our act of reading, we assume that “the events reported by the narrative voice belong to the past of that voice.” In his exploration of the overlapping boundary between history and fiction, Ricoeur reinterprets Aristotle’s distinction between what might have happened and what actually did happen to argue that the quasi-historical character of fiction serves to detect and “free, retrospectively, possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past.” The realm of the possible, not simply opposed to that of the actual, is reformulated to be internally bound by the restraint of verisimilitude, which refers to an ethical limit to novelistic creation as it is obliged to simulate “history’s debt to the people of the past” through the quasi-historical character of narrative.³³

Ricoeur’s consideration of the quasi-historical of fictional narrative turns what White posed as the question of contestability at the heart of the discursive nature of narrative into an ethical issue implicated in the retrospective narration of what happened. The ethical question is intimately bound up with the temporal significations of fictional narrative. In recounting something as if it had been and exploring the realm of the possible, fictional narrative interweaves two conflicting temporal perspectives: events viewed in the condition of having been and in their openness to contingencies and uncertainties. As illustrated in the narrative technique of foreshadowing, the past is presented as already structured into the textures of memory from the privileged position of the present in retrospective narration. On the other hand, the retrospective symbolization, always partial, leaves “shards and remainders,” through which we obtain

³³ Paul Ricoeur. “The Interweaving of History and Fiction.” *Time and narrative*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. 190-92.

a glimpse of the past as a time dense with unfulfilled and unrealized promises and possibilities. In other words, it is only through the process of retrospective narration that the contingencies and uncertainties of the ‘now’ turn into the unactualized potentialities of the past.

A different politics of memory is set forth when in the second thesis on the philosophy of history Benjamin addresses the relation of our utopian imagination to the redemptive aspect of memory: “our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption.” He suggests that there is “a temporal index” in the past itself “by which it is referred to redemption.” The redemptive function of memory, however, is not in its nostalgic evocation of the past as a time of plenitude into presence so much as in its access to the unrealized and unfulfilled possibilities of the past, “people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us.”³⁴ In the act of reading the “temporal index,” time is refigured as disjunctive: the ‘time of the now’ in a configuration pregnant with tensions, or what Derrida calls the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present.”³⁵ The “past as to come” as Derrida puts it is different from the “future-past” of nostalgic memory in that it refers to a de-totalizing conception of time that disrupts the linear succession of a before and an after based on the present order of hegemony. Memory is re-politicized in such a move to introduce the heterogeneity of otherness to the homogenized temporal horizon of what is considered actual and effective in the present order.

³⁴ Benjamin. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. 254.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 1994. xix.

Modernity and the Question of Place

The contemporaneity of time is haunted by the ghost of space.
Timothy Mitchell

Jameson describes the growing attention to the spatial as a symptom of the globalization of modernity. Modernity “reigns triumphant and homogeneous over all space”³⁶ in the postmodern globalized world, and our historical perspective is reduced to the present as we lose the sense of deep time the moderns had through the coexistence of distinct temporalities and spaces in the partially industrialized modern world. Describing the spatial turn as a “trend to privilege the spatialization of time (Being) over the annihilation of space by time (Becoming),” Harvey is concerned about its nostalgic tendency to cling to the identity of place for a sense of stability and security against the collapse of spatial distinctions. He warns that it may lead to “reinforcement of a political ideology that sees place and Being with all its associated aesthetic qualities as a proper basis for social action.”³⁷ The spatialization of time is thus linked with the reactionary kind of politics that reaffirms and promotes a singular local or national identity against global force’s change.

In an interview with a French geography journal, Foucault argues that time has been privileged over space in the modern metaphors of time and space: “Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.” The dualism, however, is unsettled when we consider

³⁶ Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. xx.

³⁷ David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989. 273, 304.

that a certain kind of spatial figuration underpins even the modern way of historical thinking based on “the old schemas of evolution, living continuity, organic development, the progress of consciousness or the project of existence.”³⁸ Thus Foucault traces the problem with the dualistic conception of time and space to the fundamental dilemma of representing time or human experience in spatial form. We can view his genealogical approach to historical events “in their proper dispersions” as an attempt to conceive of time and history in a spatial figuration different from the evolutionary model.

The binary thinking of time and space is repeated in a struggle over value in using the binary terms space/place: “‘Space’ is more abstract and ubiquitous: it connotes capital, history, and activity, and gestures towards the meaninglessness of distance in a world of instantaneous communication and ‘virtuality’; ‘place’ connotes, by contrast, the kernel or center of one’s memory and experience – a dwelling, a familiar park or city street, one’s family or community.” An ambiguity of value hangs over the pairing as “the former is both bloodless and forward-looking while the latter is both personally vital and static.”³⁹

In an attempt to avoid the trap of binary thinking, Henri Lefebvre presents a conceptual triad for the analysis of space: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Representations of space refer to the “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers,” while representational space, “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and

³⁸ Michel Foucault. *Powerknowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 70.

³⁹ Timothy Brennan. "From Development to Globalisation: Postcolonial Studies and Globalisation Theory." *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Ed. Neil Lazarus. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 130.

symbols,” is space imagined by inhabitants and linked to artists and writers:

“Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time.”⁴⁰ If representations of space signify the dominant space in any society, representational space is related to the ways imagination seeks to change and appropriate the dominated space—the space imposed and passively experienced. Even though the two terms are embedded in the conceptual triad, the distinction seems to repeat the binary terms space/place.

Certeau similarly uses the term ‘spatialization’ to highlight acts of (re)appropriating the space organized by the established socioeconomic order through creative practices of everyday life. He takes as an example of the creative spatial practice ‘footsteps’—“the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of [‘discipline’].” Intertwining paths and weaving places together with footsteps, pedestrians do not experience the imposed spatial order passively, but actively reappropriate it: they are “not localized; it is rather they that spatialize.”⁴¹ Spatialization as an act of creating “trajectories” through walking in the city is here counter-posed to localization, in which citizens are passive subjects to be assigned local identities in the city’s topographical system.

Space for Lefebvre is not an empty container of objects and practices, but a social product. If space is a social product, Lefebvre suggests, discourse on space should

⁴⁰ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991. 38-9, 42.

⁴¹ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984. xiv, 97.

reproduce the generative process. To take the spatial turn is, therefore, not necessarily to opt out of progress and history: “If space is produced, if there is a productive process, then we are dealing with *history*.”⁴² Our knowledge of space should be expected to read historical traces inscribed in space:

The historical and its consequences, the ‘diachronic,’ the ‘etymology’ of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it—all of this becomes inscribed in space. The past leaves its traces; time has its own script. Yet this space is always, now and formerly, a *present* space, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality.⁴³

In his emphasis on the production of space, Lefebvre views representations of space and representational spaces as interconnected and intertwined through the actions of subjects. Space implies social relationships and is a political process: “Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies. There is an ideology of space.”⁴⁴ Place as “a dwelling, a familiar park or city street, one’s family or community,” then, is only one form of spatial conception with its own ideology and politics as a locale or site can be perceived in a complex set of relationships and different levels of social space.

⁴² Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. 46.

⁴³ Ibid. 37.

⁴⁴ Henri Lefebvre. “Reflections on the Politics of Space.” *Antipode* 8.2 (1976): p.31. Requoted from Andrew Thacker. *Moving through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism*. New York: Manchester UP, 2003. 17.

Faced with the geographical stretching-out of social relations in the new phase of ‘time-space compression,’ we need a new sense of place whose definition not only includes wider social relations, but also challenges our idea of boundaries as it comes “through the particularity of linkage to that ‘outside’ which is therefore itself part of what constitutes the place.”⁴⁵ The term “spatialization” itself thus poses a problem of representation we face in rethinking modernity in relation to the problematic of otherness. The process of what Marx called the “annihilation of space through time,” Harvey points out, also heightens the sensitivity to “what the world’s spaces contain”: “the more unified the space, the more important the qualities of the fragmentations become for social identity and action.”⁴⁶ The postmodern shift to a spatial dominant is related not only to the increased recognition of the internal tensions of cultural space, but also to ‘an explosion of otherness’ released by the movement of decolonization after the world wars. With a new wave of time-space compression and the postcolonial flow of migration, the figures of absent others infiltrate the social and cultural landscape of a place to unsettle its identity as if the ghostly figures like “an outside like the other face of a mirror”⁴⁷ came up to return the gaze. The presence of other spaces, which has been discounted in the West-centered account of modernity based on the experience of progress through modernization, intrudes on the modern historical consciousness to put into question the ideology of progress and teleological notions of history.

⁴⁵ Doreen Massey. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994. 155.

⁴⁶ Harvey. 294.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson. "Modernism and Imperialism." *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. 43-68.

Critical efforts to question the “now” of modernity have emerged with the growing need to rethink the paradigm of evolutionism and the myth of progress as the sensitivity to otherness in various and multiple forms is heightened in changing social and cultural landscapes. Critical attention has been turned to the question of how a specific place for the other has been figured forth in the modern imaginary of time and space. As Harvey points out, the problem with Enlightenment thought is not that there is no place for the other in it but that it “perceived ‘the other’ as necessarily having (and sometimes ‘keeping to’) a specific *place* in a spatial order that was ethnocentrically conceived to have homogeneous and absolute qualities.”⁴⁸ In the modern conception of time modeled on the paradigm of evolutionism, the other is placed according to a scheme of what can be called ‘temporal distancing,’ which affirms difference as temporal distance in constructing relations with the other. Modern historiography is thus involved in an ideological process of representing relations with the other in terms of distance in space and time as it defines ‘the other’ as ‘backward’ in the line of development.⁴⁹

In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty criticizes historicism for its inscription of the modern narrative of progress or development. What is problematic of historicism as regards Non-European cultures is the historicist consciousness of “not yet” that prevents non-European peoples from participating in a “now” as a temporal horizon of action. The project of provincializing Europe questions the conception of a

⁴⁸ Harvey. 252.

⁴⁹ For the links between modern notions of space and time and relations of mapping and boundary setting, see Jonathan Boyarin. *Remapping Memory: the Politics of Timespace*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994. 266. As for the ‘temporal distancing’ as an ideological process, see Johannes Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983.

secular, empty, and homogeneous historical time embedded in historicism and presents as a strategy of decentering the European paradigm of modernity a counter-assumption that historical time is “out of joint with itself.” Chakrabarty suggests that we reconceptualize the present itself in its heterogeneity from an assumption of “a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself.”⁵⁰

In his seminal essay on alternate modernities, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar announces “modernity is not one, but many” as our conception of modernity needs to be revised based on recognition of other spaces whose presence has been repressed or erased in the singular narrative of modernity. He reformulates modernity as “a form of discourse that interrogates the present” based on Foucault’s critical reinterpretation of Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?”⁵¹ Foucault argues that what distinguishes Kant from Descartes is his questioning of the present to which he belongs. Kant’s text inaugurates a new attitude of philosophy turned toward problematizing its own discursive contemporaneity: “What is my present? What is the meaning of this present? And what am I doing when I speak of this present?” With this new conception of philosophy as the problematization of a present, Foucault contends, Kant moved the axis of question from the classical focus on the sequential relation between antiquity and modernity to “a new way of posing the question of modernity, not in a longitudinal relation to the Ancients, but in what might be called a ‘sagittal’ relation to one’s own present.”⁵² Rethinking

⁵⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. 16, 109.

⁵¹ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. "On Alternative Modernities." *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999): 16, 13.

⁵² Michel Foucault. "The Art of Telling the Truth." *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault Habermas Debate*. Ed. Michael Kelly. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. 141.

modernity in the mode of reflective relation to the present, Foucault suggests, is “work on our limits”:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.⁵³

Foucault’s critical revision of Enlightenment as self-reflective questionings of what we are projects the present as “out of joint with itself.” The attitude of posing the question of modernity in a ‘sagittal’ relation to one’s own present does not approach what defines the modern as modern from the temporal boundary that divides it from what precedes or comes after it, but finds the limits of what defines the modern as internal to itself.

Postcolonial critics tease out Foucault’s reformulation of modernity by examining the question of place as a spectral presence in the narrative of modernity. Translating Kant’s question reintroduced by Foucault from the position of the subaltern, Homi Bhabha asks: “What is this ‘now’ of modernity? Who defines this present from which we speak?”⁵⁴ With his silence about colonialism, Bhabha argues, Foucault is also projecting a temporality of the synchronous in which cultural differences are

⁵³ Michel Foucault. “What Is Enlightenment?” *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 50.

⁵⁴ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 244.

homogenized. While Foucault also turns to a questioning of the ‘now’ of modernity in his attempt to re-conceptualize Enlightenment as the critical ontology of ourselves, it is true that the “work on limits” he suggests as a critical effort to re-define “what we are” is marked by his silence about colonial others that helped form the modern bourgeois self.

Timothy Mitchell states in terms borrowed from Henri Bergson, “The contemporaneity of time is haunted by the ghost of space.” An insight into the fundamental dilemma of representing time or human experience in spatial form, it also points to the modern conception of time as a homogenous medium: “in place of a heterogeneous duration whose moments permeate one another, we thus get a homogenous time whose moments are strung on a spatial line.”⁵⁵ Mitchell turns the haunting “ghost of space” into a complex historical and geographical figure by suggesting that “modernity is produced *as* the West.”⁵⁶ In Edward Said’s account of how Europe’s sense of cultural identity was constructed in the business of colonizing, empire has been put back into the narrative of modernity through the postcolonialist critical attempt to show the West as the product of modernity. Mitchell goes further than simply affirming the function of colonialism in the shaping of modernity and turns attention to the way the non-West plays the “role of the outside, the otherness that creates the boundary of the space of modernity.” It is similar to what Harvey pointed out as the problem with Enlightenment: the ethnocentric conception of a spatial order with “homogeneous and absolute qualities.” Yet Mitchell’s statement implies the complex

⁵⁵ Henri Bergson and Frank Lubecki Pogson. *Time and Free Will; an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. New York: G. Allen & Unwin, 1971. 95.

⁵⁶ Timothy Mitchell. “The Stage of Modernity.” *Questions of Modernity*. Ed. Timothy Mitchell. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. 15.

ways in which temporal and spatial projections of otherness intertwine in the construction of what is modern. The non-West in the “role of the outside” represents “the non-place, terra incognita, the wasteland,” a place outside of history, or “the place of timelessness,” a point for marking out the temporal break of modernity as Mitchell explains in terms borrowed from Bhabha.⁵⁷

When modernity is produced as the West, the West does not refer to a place that can be located on the map, but acquires the “abstract and ubiquitous” quality of space: “The West is not in the West. It is a project, not a place,” as Edouard Glissant writes.⁵⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests that spatial reorganization under the development of world capitalism can be read through a geography of imagination and a geography of management as these “two related mappings, two intertwined yet distinct geographies,” work together to create places. This distinction is useful for understanding how a geography of imagination, similar to what Certeau designates as ‘spatialization,’ is needed for a reorganization of space for political management in the process of modernization. In other words, the subjects, “caught in the nets of discipline,” never just passively experience the imposed spatial order, but ‘spatialize’ a place or locale by projecting themselves in the given spatial relations. This process also relates place to time as it requires the subject to be positioned in relation to time in order to project the place against a spatial background that is theoretically unlimited. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s argument that modernity implies a fundamental shift in regimes of

⁵⁷ Ibid. 16.

⁵⁸ Édouard Glissant and J. Michael Dash. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989. 2. Recited from Michel-Rolph Trouillot. “The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot.” *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*. Ed. Bruce M. Knauft. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. 222.

historicity, then, Trouillot contends that modernity requires a “localization of space.” The geography of imagination, which is inherent in the project of modernity as the West, requires two complementary spaces, the Here and the Elsewhere, as modernity requires “an alterity, a referent outside of itself,” to define itself as modern. In the modern linear conception of time, an Elsewhere, “a space of and for the Other,” is placed ‘behind’ or ‘ahead’ from the viewpoint of anyone in the line. Thus modernity as a historical process creates other spaces, “places, locales against which we can read what it means to be modern,” which can be called modernity’s alter egos, “as modern as the West, yet otherwise modern.”⁵⁹

Here we can stretch out the point made by Glissant and suggest that the ‘non-West’ is not a place outside of the West, but a spatial projection of what falls off the ‘here and now’ of modernity in the geography of imagination. Certeau contends, “Within a stratified society, historiography defined as ‘past’ (that is, as an ensemble of alterities and of ‘resistances’ to be comprehended or rejected) whatever did not belong to the power of producing a present.”⁶⁰ As discussed above, Certeau draws attention to the unspoken, silenced, or excluded on the margins of historical discourse in his redefinition of history from the perspective of a heterology, a discourse on the other. If spaces for the Other are projected as part of the production of modernity in the modern subject’s imaginary relation to material production under the changed temporal-historical regime

⁵⁹ Ibid. 222-25.

⁶⁰ Michel de Certeau. "History: Science and Fiction." *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. 216.

of the modern world, history as “a work on the margins” from the heterological perspective is also expected to present readings of spatial alterities.

Jameson suggests “cognitive mapping” as an aesthetic for representing the relation between an individual subject locally positioned and the “totality of class structures in which he or she is situated” in the new phase of world capitalism. The conception of mapping, drawn from Kevin Lynch’s spatial analysis and extrapolated to the realm of social structure, is used as a “spatial analogue” of the Althusserian sense of ideology to stress the gap between an individual subject’s phenomenological perception and the totality of social relations. Jameson’s use of the spatial term shows his acknowledgement of the critical need to respond to the growing complexity of spatial dimensions in the global multinational network and migrations. With no further development of thoughts on the historical and spatial matters involved in the production of a modern subject, however, Jameson’s conception of cognitive mapping seems to stop at using the spatial term merely as an analogy.

The heterological mapping of one’s location is a reading of one’s location in disjunctive spatial relations as produced in history, or of the seeing eye of a modern subject, located in history, in the process of producing space in terms of the ‘here and now’ and the ‘Elsewhere.’ A “politics of location” Adrienne Rich attempts to articulate in exploring the complexity and depth of configuring one’s discursive identity gives us an idea of such a mapping of one’s position in relation to other spaces:

It was in the writings but also the actions and speeches and sermons of Black United States citizens that I began to experience the meaning of my whiteness as a point of location for which I needed to take responsibility. It was in reading poems by contemporary Cuban women that I began to experience the meaning of North America as a location which had also shaped my ways of seeing and my ideas of who and what was important, a location for which I was also responsible. I traveled then to Nicaragua, where, in a tiny impoverished country, in a four-year-old society dedicated to eradicating poverty, under the hills of the Nicaragua-Honduras border, I could physically feel the weight of the United States of North America, its military forces, its vast appropriations of money, its mass media, at my back; I could feel what it means, dissident or not, to be part of that raised boot of power, the cold shadow we cast everywhere to the south.⁶¹

Based on encounters she had with others through her readings or travel, she identifies points of location which produce her privileged position of whiteness, and acknowledges her responsibility for “white circumscribing,” the white Western self-centeredness. In her persistent interrogation of what it means to say “we” in speaking as women, Rich tries to show how refiguring her identity “as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist” in relation to the others produces location not confined by the limits of hegemonic formations: “I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history

⁶¹ Adrienne Rich. “Notes toward a Politics of Location (1984).” *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. 220.

within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create.”⁶²

Stories of the Border in Postmodernist Narratives of Memory

The novel functions as the symbolic form of the nation-state...
Franco Moretti

Franco Moretti redefines the form of the historical novel in terms of “a phenomenology of the border.” The form of the genre makes a journey into the past visible through the space of the border because it is “*only in the proximity of the internal border*” that we can see the non-contemporaneity of a nation-state “made of many temporal layers.” In Walter Scott’s historical novels, the internal periphery, a marginal place as a juncture of regions with different temporalities, is a means to visualize a nation as ‘historical,’ i.e., in the process of transitioning from a more savage space to a civilized one. If the function of the novel lies in providing a symbolic space for representing the nation-state, historical novels tell “not just stories ‘of’ the border, but of its erasure, and of the incorporation of the internal periphery into the larger unit of the state.”⁶³ Moretti thus reads geography into narrative form to see how the novel functions as the symbolic form of the nation-state by weaving internal divisions into a story.

It was not only with the historical novel but with what Bakhtin calls the ‘novel of emergence’ in general, which depicts man in the process of becoming, that ‘real

⁶² Ibid. 212.

⁶³ Franco Moretti. *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*. New York: Verso, 1998. 35, 38, 40.

historical time' was incorporated to narrative form in the development of realist novels. The novel's assimilation of historical time, Bakhtin writes, reached a crowning point with Goethe who could see time in space and vice versa: reading signs of time in everything. With his ability to see time in space, Goethe gave a temporal significance to the diversity of contemporary life. If synchronism, the coexistence of things in different temporalities, is a modern phenomenon, the irregular space of modern society gains unity as an emerging whole through a seeing eye like Goethe's. His historical perspective finds necessary connections in spatial contiguities by locating their temporal stages—"as remnants or relics of various stages and formations of the past and as rudiments of stages in the more or less distant future."⁶⁴ Despite his apparent aversion to the mechanical mix-up of past and present, or to the simple coexistence of things without necessary connections, however, Goethe admits to an ambivalent feeling such an eclectic sight evokes:

One feeling, which prevailed greatly with me, and could never find an expression odd enough for itself, was a sense of the past and present together in one—a phenomenon which brought something spectral into the present. It is expressed in many of my smaller and larger works, and always has a beneficial influence in a poem, though, whenever it began to mix itself up with actual life, it must have appeared to every one strange, inexplicable, perhaps gloomy.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ M. M. Bakhtin. "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Eds. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986. 28.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 35.

The spectral effect of the merging of times disrupts the contemporaneity of the present as structured in the frame of historicism. Goethe calls what is not contained within the rational limits of the historicist terms the ‘ghostly, terrifying, and unaccountable,’ a romantic component Bakhtin says Goethe overcomes through the realistic component.

Concerned with a ground for historical difference, Chakrabarty draws attention to the kind of a past that is not separate from nor totally subsumed into the universal and necessary logic of capital, but constantly interrupting its universalizing and totalizing thrusts. The merging of times, described by Goethe as “a phenomenon which brings something spectral into the present,” is addressed by Chakrabarty from the perspective of subaltern histories, which includes not only the pasts of subordinate or minority groups but also those of dominant groups put aside in the writing of official history. His attempt to re-conceptualize the present against the totalizing conception of historical time through the project of provincializing Europe leads him to a critical reflection on the limits of history in terms of “a border zone of temporality”—“something we are able to see only because we can think/theorize capital, but that also always reminds us that other temporalities, other forms of worlding, coexist and are possible.”⁶⁶

To read geography into temporal accounts of modernity from a heterological perspective is to detect traces of internal periphery in the seeming ‘fullness of time.’ It unsettles the biographical-historical narrative of becoming and the logic of globalization as an extension of the idea of homogeneous empty time that, marked by temporal

⁶⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. 95.

coincidence and measured by clock and calendar, provides a basis for temporal and spatial totalizations. How does the “phenomenology of the border” work in the postmodern homogeneous world spaces when the increasing globality of the system entails a new form of representational crisis as shifting temporal and spatial horizons challenge the unity and continuity of the nation-state as both a territorial-cartographic reality and a synchronic totality? Viewed from the revisionist perspective on modern history as haunted by the question of others, what Moretti formulated as “a phenomenology of the border” turns into something like a ‘ghosting’ or ‘hauntology’ of the border. Simon Gikandi draws attention to the colonial question as an invisible but effective specter haunting postimperial sites and decolonized nations:

At the twilight of the modern age, then, an examination of the function of colonialism in the shaping of modernity is not an act of theoretical reversion; on the contrary, it is an attempt to name—and thus come to terms with—the hitherto invisible specter whose presence we have felt around us, whose effectivity we have encountered in the texts of our identity, but whose logic we could not name until now.⁶⁷

The seeing eye “at the twilight of the modern age” finds imperial legacies still ‘effective,’ if not visible, in the postcolonial globalizing world as it haunts English and postcolonial identities. It perceives the historical traces of what has happened at a

⁶⁷ Simon Gikandi. *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. 3.

location, the diachronic or ‘etymology’ of space in Lefebvre’s terms, inscribed in a “*present* space given as an immediate whole.” The immediacy of spatial totality at a present time is then challenged by the perception of what is not contained in the positivistic historicist terms.

I propose that certain postmodernist narratives of memory make the “border zone of temporality” visible through a journey into the past at the “twilight of the modern age.” Sites of memory in their postmodernist revisions of modern history are often placed at the limits of historical narrativization as they mark traumatic points or ‘shards and remainders’ left aside in the retroactive process of symbolization for the remembering subject in their attempt to retrace the process of becoming. The traumatic point, a non-symbolized real, confronts the remembering subject as the haunting spectral not assimilated into the symbolic network. In recounting modern history from a heterological perspective, the narratives explore the traumatic sites of memory as what make ruptures in the teleological narrative of becoming and constitute “knots of meaning” pregnant with different cultural significations from the particular perspectives of class and gender.

Situated in history but on the margins of the symbolic order, such sites unsettle the nostalgic reading of signs in counter-position to the icons of Empire. They are presented in the process of decay as ‘ruins’ in which history is de-sublimated as it merges into nature. The ruin, in which history and nature, disintegrated from the symbolic totality, become “all-too-earthly,” is a form that Benjamin proposes

crystallizes the allegorical.⁶⁸ The transition of the symbolic into the allegorical as Benjamin describes it is marked by the separation of the coherent order of time from the body of historical events: “The mystical instant [Nu] becomes the ‘now’ [Jetzt] of contemporary actuality; the symbolic becomes distorted into the allegorical.” With the movement of demystification in the allegorical, the de-sublimated image is “open to all kinds of revision by the interpretative artist.” This ‘now’ is distinct from a present, a moment in homogenous empty time and space conceived as the basis of imagining a nation-state in synchronic unity and continuity. Allegory in Benjamin’s reinvention is a way of seeing the act of signification at the heart of the symbolic network of history. Unlike the symbol in which the traces of mediation are erased in the process of idealization, allegory reveals the gap between nature and culture, the arbitrary connection between meaning and sign that is at work in artistic or historical representations.

The allegorical in postmodernist narratives of memory, then, needs to be distinguished from the work of “pure, exclusively self-referential signs,” which Nora asserts as the decisive trait of ‘*lieux de mémoire*’:

This is not to say that they are without content, physical presence, or history; it is to suggest that what makes them *lieux de mémoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history. In this sense, the *lieux de mémoire* is double: a site of excess

⁶⁸ Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 180.

closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations.⁶⁹

As with his distinction between authentic memory and history as the incomplete reconstruction of the past, Nora here sets the ‘lieux de mémoire’ apart from the ‘lieux d’histoire’ arguing that the former have no referent in reality contrary to historical objects. It is through the very self-referentiality, he insists, that the ‘lieux de mémoire’ are open to all the possibilities of different significations. In postmodernist narratives of memory, however, the gap between sign and meaning is an invitation to create alternative constellations with signs estranged from the tradition of interpretation rather than an opening for “escape from history.” The allegorical approach as such shows a sensitivity to cultural significations pregnant with tensions and conflicts hidden beneath the assimilatory movement of symbol. Benjamin points out, “in comparison to the symbol, the western conception of allegory is a late manifestation which has its basis in certain very fertile cultural conflicts.”⁷⁰

My dissertation attempts to read how the postmodernist narratives of memory in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* refigure historical time and space in intertwining personal stories of crisis with public history through acts of remembering. If Scott’s historical novels tell stories of the border and of its erasure by placing it in the ‘historical’ process, as Moretti puts it, these postmodernist narratives of memory explore the erased stories of

⁶⁹ Nora. 23-4.

⁷⁰ Benjamin. *The origin of German Tragic Drama*. 197.

the border and show the homogenous time and space of a nation as haunted by its others, whose stories have been repressed in official history. Questioning the modernist ideology of progress based on the idea of the linear sequence of time, the novels do not only retrace the heterogeneous and discontinuous layers of stories overlooked or repressed in official accounts of modern history, but also re-examine the contradictory and contested process by which subjects are situated or positioned, and its effects on the production of knowledge.

Chapter 2 examines how Swift's *Waterland*, a novel considered a good example of "historiographic metafiction" in its postmodernist paradoxical move to present a historical account and at the same time problematize it, explores the overlapping boundary between historical and fictional modes of narrative and presents telling stories as a way to cope with the threat of the "end of history." Tom Crick, the main character and narrator of the novel, the history teacher who is about to be forced to retire as his school is cutting history, retells the events of his life intertwined with local and family history as history lessons in the classroom instead of the appointed curriculum, the French Revolution. While Tom constructs history as "his" story through his retellings of the past, he tries to retrieve stories of others who have been lost or repressed in official history. Disillusioned with the grand narrative of History as progress but holding on to the need to preserve the artifice of civilization, Tom presents "the process of human siltation" as his humble model for progress. Layers of allegory can be found in the novel as Tom's personal story interwoven with a genealogy of the fenland and his parents' families, the Atkinsons and the Cricks, is linked to Britain's national and imperial

narrative of progress. The section will discuss what significance the allegorical links have in relation to the novel's repeated questioning of the Idea of Progress and meditations on temporality and geographical imaginary through a critical examination of the ways the limits of historical narrativization are explored as traumatic points for the remembering subject.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* also presents a layered narrative of Saleem Sinai telling his story from a sense of personal crisis, which is intertwined with a complicated genealogy of his family. The sense of crisis is also public in that the urgent need to recount stories of the past comes from Saleem's concern about the new amnesiac generation, which is strikingly represented in the episode of the "Midnite Confidential Club," an epitome of a new postmodern world just living for "here and now" with no memories of the past. Focused on the ways the novel problematizes history from the perspective of a postcolonial subject, Chapter 3 will examine allegorical connections between Saleem's story and the national history of Post-Independence India. A novel of memory and about memory, *Midnight's Children* employs diverse aspects of memory to show that Saleem's act of remembering branches out to include reminiscences of intertwined lives of others in constructing counter-stories of Post-Independence India as multiple alternatives to one official version of history. I'll read Saleem's inventive genealogies as the novel's postcolonial concern with a space-in-between in search of a new form of identity different both from the European model and from the pre-colonial Indian society. The section will draw on what Chakrabarty suggests as the process of

translating “other temporalities, other forms of worldings”⁷¹ into the categories of Enlightenment thought to discuss how the novel’s use of myths and magical realism is related to its way of addressing the limits of history in terms of “a border zone of temporality” and what is not contained in the process of translation.

As implied in the title, Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* examines the traces of the past left on the present-time in people’s lives and the borders which divide peoples and families after the partition of India and Pakistan. The novel presents allegories of identity through mirror images and dual structures between people and between cities: London and Calcutta, or Dhaka and Calcutta, cities on either side of the imperial or national border, each of which is described as “the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by...our looking-glass border” (228). Through acts of remembering across gaps of time and space, the narrator recollects the haunting presences of forgotten people and voices in the process of telling the “overlapping territories, intertwined histories”⁷² of interconnected families and lives across borders. Chapter 4 will examine how the text presents different ways of spatializing places or locales as part of the process in which subjects map their identities and project their positions through the geography of imagination. The narrative of memory in the novel renders the tragic event of Tridib’s death in 1964 during a communal riot as a traumatic point which marks the tension between the real and discourse.

Lastly, a coda to the dissertation will begin with a review of the main points that have been discussed in the preceding chapters. It will then address the ways in which the

⁷¹ Chakrabarty. 95.

⁷² Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. 3.

function of the reader is textualized as a listener of the stories told in Swift's *Waterland*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. This postmodernist strategy, part of the open and allegorical structure of the layered narratives, can be read in relation to the novels' concern with storytelling and explorations of the overlapping boundary between fictional and historical modes of narrative. Benjamin's storyteller is a man who transmits counsel in the form of story, which is "less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding."⁷³ I'll suggest that storytelling as a way of weaving a web of genealogies counteracts the melancholic and pessimistic tone of the novels in following what has happened in post-colonial English and Indian histories. It is also bound up with serious reflections on temporality and spatiality performed in the novels. There is a Utopian dimension in the postmodernist revisions of history, not in the sense that they envision a future with certain positive forms and shapes as in the existing literature of Utopianism or that they subject the past and the present to a teleological movement toward a future. In revisiting the past from a heterological perspective and retrieving what has been forgotten or repressed in official history, the postmodernist narratives of memory in the novels turn the time of the now into a time for the "past as to come," a time to detect the unrealized and unfulfilled possibilities of the past.

⁷³ Benjamin. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." 86.

CHAPTER II
ALLEGORIES OF PROGRESS AND THE LIMITS OF HISTORY:

GRAHAM SWIFT'S *WATERLAND*

The first of the two epigraphs to Graham Swift's *Waterland*, published in 1983, signals the novel's engagement with the limits of history by listing the different meanings of the word's Latin form: "Historia, -ae, f. 1. inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story." By opening the novel with this definitional ambivalence of history as a practice and discourse, Swift hints that the novel's approach to history is concerned with the boundary of what "makes" history.

The novel puts the issue of history in crisis at the center in layered ways: the narrator and main character Tom Crick, a history teacher who is about to be forced to retire after Mary Metcalf, his wife, was arrested for kidnapping a baby, recounts local and family history as history lessons and as an inquiry into what went wrong. The "end of history" in a double meaning drives Tom's historical inquiry and story in the novel's present. Tom's school is cutting history, as the headteacher, Lewis, is under pressure to trim down subjects with no "practical relevance to today's real world"; he stands for the utilitarian ethos of Thatcherite England in 1980 when he asserts, "Send just one of these kids out into the world with a sense of his or her usefulness, with an ability to apply, with practical knowledge and not a rag-bag of pointless information—" (22).

Tom starts telling stories as history lessons addressed to a class of school children and, more particularly, to Price, President of ‘the Holocaust Club – the Anti-Armageddon League’ (236), who speaks for the postmodern youth deprived of futurity under the threat of nuclear annihilation⁷⁴: “The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably about to end” (7). In a way, Tom Crick is retelling the events of his life as an attempt to defend the relevance of history against the challenges of Lewis-like advocates of practical knowledge and his pupils to whom what matters is the urgency of what is happening in the world “here and now”—“Afghanistan, Iran, Northern Ireland, the ills of this worn-out country of ours” (165). Although hit hard by the “here and now” himself, Tom is trying to show that the here and now is “neither now nor here” for most of the time as “life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson” (61).

Different ends of history are evoked in Tom Crick’s retelling of the past: “In 1793 the Apocalypse came to Paris (just a few thousand heads); in 1917 it came to the swamps of Flanders. But in August, 1943...it came in the form of detonating goose eggs to Hamsburg, Nuremberg and Berlin...” (299). One of the pasts Tom revisits is set in his childhood days in the 1940s, when he played with a group of school children including his mentally-disabled half-brother Dick, Mary Metcalf, and Freddie Parr while the Second World War was throwing an ominous shadow over the game they were playing out of adolescent sexual curiosity. It is in response to Price’s challenge and the threat of nuclear annihilation that Tom recounts a local narrative of progress, how his ancestors

⁷⁴ Peter Widdowson. *Graham Swift*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006. 35.

“made” history in the Fens and built a local empire and how it ended with the burning-down of the Atkinson Brewery at the time of Ernest Atkinson, his grandfather.

How is the novel’s exploration of the limits of history related to these suggestive parallels made between past and present in the text through allegorical links between Tom Crick’s personal crisis and a public sense of crisis in postmodern/postimperial England? By rendering the narrator’s act of revisiting and retelling the past as prompted by a sense of crisis in different but related forms of “end” with regard to the discipline of history and the grand narrative of History as progress, the novel tackles the question of historicity at the time the “center” of the universalist narrative of History is said to be falling apart. With the spatial logic of simulacrum penetrating into all social and cultural spheres in the postmodern age, Fredric Jameson argues, we are bereft of genuine historicity as “the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future.” While the spatial logic looks dominant in the novel’s disjunctive narrative structure in which the past time of the story is intersected with the present time of retelling it, I suggest Swift attempts to rethink the question of historicity in a changing social and cultural condition by de-centering the modern narrative of progress through a critical examination of the discursive nature of history.

A critical recognition of the discursive nature of history, which was implied in the epigraph, underlies the novel’s approach to the relationship between past and present, between text and historical context. If Tom’s retelling of the past can be read as his own way of defending the relevance of history, it is an unconventional one as it often veers off into digressions and reflections on the constructedness of history as a discourse.

With all its frequent references to historical events and specific dates, the novel foregrounds its concern with history while self-reflexively questioning the human act of imposing structures on “the great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality” (17). As many critics have pointed out,⁷⁵ the novel fits well into what Linda Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction” in its postmodernist paradoxical move to present a historical account and at the same time problematize it. Hutcheon’s “poetics of postmodernism” is an effort to consider the complexities and creative potential of postmodern cultural practices against the kind of simplistic critical stance that dismisses postmodernism as ahistorical or postmodernist uses of history as nostalgic.

What postmodernism does, as its very name suggests, is confront and contest any modernist discarding or recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present. We could call this, once again, “the presence of the past” or perhaps its “present-ification.” It does not deny the *existence* of the past; it does question whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Pamela Cooper. "Imperial Topographies: The Spaces of History in *Waterland*." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 42.2 (1996): 374. Robert K. Irish. "'Let Me Tell You': About Desire and Narrativity in Graham Swift's *Waterland*." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. 44.4 (1998): 918. Paul Smethurst. *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 154-55.

⁷⁶ Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. 19-20.

Hutcheon suggests that postmodernist fiction engages itself with historical contexts but puts into question both the nature of the referent and its relation to the real, historical world by self-reflexively addressing the textuality of history: “We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts.”⁷⁷

Jameson points out that the past as lived reality, which was the object of the traditional genre of the historical novel, is displaced by our ideas and stereotypes about the past in the postmodern variant of the same genre. If it is true that the serious work of reconstructing the past as it was once a present yields to critical reflections on the problematic nature of history in the postmodernist historical fiction, the return to history does not merely lead to the nostalgic revival of stylized images and stereotypes for evoking the pastness. To emphasize the epistemologically unstable status of the past in the poststructuralist critique of historicism focused on the problem of textuality and reference is not equal to denying the fact that the past “real” existed. Questioning the historicist assumption of an unproblematical relationship between the production of historical knowledge, its sources of evidence and their referentiality to the “real” world, the critical focus on the nature of textuality leads to an observation that the factuality of a past is produced as a cultural and historical construct since the past is always perceived through the inevitable traces of subjective interpretations.

Waterland questions conventional history’s reliance on the authority of experience as self-evident and shows that the historical real cannot be accessed in itself

⁷⁷ Ibid. 114.

but through its textualized remains. In his inquiry into the truth of what happened in the past Tom Crick has to rely on archival documents, local newspapers, or even dusty inquest transcripts from a coroner's court after his friend Freddie Parr's body was found. Postmodernist in challenging the claim to objectivity by modern historiography, however, *Waterland* is not so much focused on asserting the epistemological uncertainty of historical truth as on exploring the overlapping boundary between historical and fictional modes of narrative.

As implied in the first epigraph, Tom Crick's historical inquiry in *Waterland* is designed to question and blur the distinctions between historical fact and fiction, between the disciplines of history and literature: 'historia' signifying both "a narrative of past events" and "any kind of narrative." A novel interweaving personal and family history in a "genre kaleidoscope,"⁷⁸ a mixture of a fictional autobiography, a detective story, folktale and legend juxtaposed with history textbook and encyclopedia entry, *Waterland* is "a meditation on stories and story-telling—a fictional inquiry into fiction, a book that winds back upon itself and asks why we tell stories."⁷⁹ In one of his ruminations on history, Tom Crick describes History as "the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama" and finds its affinity to Histrionics, "its near relative" (40), for sharing a "longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content" (41).

Critics point out there is "ironic ambiguity" at the heart of Swift's *Waterland* in combining historical understanding in the realist tradition with postmodernist self-

⁷⁸ David Malcolm. *Understanding Graham Swift*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2003. 13.

⁷⁹ George P. Landow. "History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's *Waterland*." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 23.2 (1990): 197.

reflexivity. As in his other novels, *Waterland* seems to propose “the possibility of salvaging some vestiges of humanity from postmodern anomie by way of ‘telling stories’ and of ‘love.’”⁸⁰ While disillusioned with the grand narrative of History as progress, “the illusion that history is a well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future” (135), Tom Crick holds on to the need to preserve “this thing called civilization” (239), “an artifice—so easily knocked down—but precious” (240):

All right, so it’s all a struggle to preserve an artifice. It’s all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. All a fight against fear. You’re scared. No need to start a club about it. Saw it in your face. And what do you think I am right now? What do you think all my sounding off is about, and what do you think all these stories are for which I’ve been telling as a finale to my teaching career and which—now you tell me—have not gone unappreciated. It helps to drive out fear. I don’t care what you call it—explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things into perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales—it helps to eliminate fear (241).

Tom’s conclusion that “history is a yarn” (62) is then rather his way of coping with the chaos of the Here and Now, his answer to the threat of another Armageddon and the end of history, than a sad acceptance of the loss of moral certainties: “But when the world is

⁸⁰ Widdowson. 40, 4.

about to end there'll be no more reality, only stories. All that will be left to us will be stories. We'll sit down, in our shelter, and tell stories, like poor Scheherazade, hoping it will never..." (298).

Swift is even labeled a "morally instructive" writer who has "moved beyond the post-modern posture of evasion and despair to a positive view of 20th century man in relation to his age."⁸¹ Drawing on Freud's essay on the difference between mourning and melancholia, Wendy Wheeler views Swift as an exemplary case of the postmodern artist who attempts to come to terms with mourning modernity's losses. When postmodernity is seen as "the attempt to live with loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition," Wheeler argues, "the problem of inventing an aesthetic form capable of telling us something about the invention of new cultural, social and political forms—a 'new modernity' or 'second Enlightenment'"—drives Swift's work.⁸²

If it may be called a "new humanism," Widdowson adds, it is "embattled, tentative, provisional and uncertain."⁸³ The novel foregrounds the subjective nature of the tales told as counter-posed to the claim to objectivity in official historiography. Addressing the discursive nature of historical narrative, Hayden White questions the structuralist assumption that narrative is a universal, transcultural meta-code. According to structuralism, narrative in its objectivity as a manner of speaking is distinguished from discourse, whose subjectivity is given by the presence of a narrating person. Yet this

⁸¹ Stef Craps. *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation*. Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005. 21.

⁸² Wendy Wheeler. "Melancholic Modernity and Contemporary Grief: The Novels of Graham Swift." *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*. Eds. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks. Harlow: Longman, 1999. 65.

⁸³ Widdowson, 4.

distinction becomes a problem when we consider the two orders of events, the real and the imaginary, which again constitute two different narrative modes, historical and fictional. A structure or an order of meaning is not discovered from but rather imposed on real events by a certain perspective that is “culture-specific, not universal at all.” Thus, the fictional and historical modes of writing overlap in the same desire to make events, real or imaginary, desirable as represented with the coherent plot of certain moral order.⁸⁴

If narrative obtains its objectivity as a manner of speaking by making “the events seem to tell themselves” with no reference to the speaker present in the text,⁸⁵ Tom Crick’s strong narrative voice stamps his selfhood all over the tales being told. Although Tom is often presumed to speak for the author Graham Swift with no evident ironic disclaimer in the text,⁸⁶ the novel’s explicit concern with the discursive nature of history and with storytelling and narrative and their relation to reality makes one read Tom’s stories as “his” version of telling the events of his life. In retelling the events of his life, Tom constructs history as “his” story.⁸⁷

Waterland opens with fairy-tale advice on stars, hearts, and mother’s milk from Tom’s father, who had “a knack for telling stories” (2); “And don’t forget... whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother’s milk...” (1). The novel then

⁸⁴ Hayden V. White. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. 1-25.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 3.

⁸⁶ Ronald H. McKinney. "The Greening of Postmodernism: Graham Swift's *Waterland*." *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 28.4 (1997): 823.

⁸⁷ Landow 199. Widdowson 27.

goes on to portray the flat and monotonous landscape of the fenland, which prompts “fruitless meditations on the laws of perspective” (3). The opening’s evocation of a fairy-tale mood with no time and place set is shattered when the “here and now” kicks in with an ominous description, tagged with a specific date, July of 1943, of the body of Tom’s friend Freddie Parr floating down the Leem.

And thus it was, one night in midsummer, when God’s withheld benedictions were shining in the sky, though this was several years after Dad told us about the stars, but only two or three since he began to speak of hearts and mother’s milk, and the tump-tump of the pumps was drowned now, in the evening, by the roar of ascending bombers – it was, to be precise, July, 1943, -- that something floated down the Leem, struck the iron-work of the sluice and, tugged by the eddies, continued to knock and scrape against it till morning. Something extraordinary and unprecedented, and not to be disposed of like a branch or potato sack or even a dead sheep. For this something was a body. And the body belonged to Freddie Parr, who lived less than a mile away and was my age, give or take a month. (4)

The nothing-landscape of the Fens, whose empty wilderness drives its residents to heavy drinking or storytelling, is disturbed by something that is situated in history: the roaring sound of bombers and a body. Lured into history for its “fabulous aura,” Tom is slapped by the “Here and Now” to see that “history was no invention but indeed existed—and I

had become part of it" (62). Thus, Tom Crick is a historical scribe and narrator who is also a participant in the events being told.

Constructing history as "his" story, Tom Crick is also trying to re-member himself. Yet to tell his story leads to retracing the intertwined stories of his family and other people's lives through his archeological detective work of following "marks upon marks" under the sudden attacks of the "here and now": "Marks, which though recent, can be seen to a discriminating eye, to an eye possessed by the detective spirit, not all to have been made at the same time" (212). While the subjective nature of Tom's alternative version of history is written all over the narrative, the whole novel itself shows how Tom fails to rebuild his life in his autobiographical effort to give a certain order or structure to it. Tom's subjectivity is presented as constituted through the stories he tells, but those stories are incomplete and disjunctive with gaps and discontinuities.

Waterland also puts Tom Crick and his story in a dialogic exchange with and across text. This intertextuality reminds the reader of the "mediated" nature of what is being told. The second epigraph, "Ours was the marsh country," a quote from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, makes another gesture toward the novel's concern with the "writerly or constructed qualities of history"⁸⁸ by setting up a discursive context for Tom's stories interwoven with the local history of the Fens and his family history.

Waterland is "a book that winds back upon other books."⁸⁹ While the "concrete detail" such as historical dates and geographical landmarks in the recounted stories produces the

⁸⁸ Daniel Bedggood. "(Re)Constituted Pasts: Postmodern Historicism in the Novels of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes." *The Contemporary British Novel Since 1980*. Eds. James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 204.

⁸⁹ Landow. 205.

effect of the “real,” the epigraph puts the narrative in a network of “multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.”⁹⁰ It is not only through the stories he tells, but also through other books he reads, including Thomas Carlyle’s *French Revolution* and historical novels such as Charles Kingsley’s *Hereward the Wake*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Black Arrow: A Tale of the Two Roses*, and George Alfred Henry’s *With Clive in India Or, The Beginnings of an Empire*, that the novel implies a formative discursive context for Tom Crick’s subjectivity constituted as he makes acquaintance with history.

As Hutcheon suggests, *Waterland* employs a mode of narration that problematizes the entire notion of subjectivity while subjectivity is inscribed into history. Tom Crick is a narrator “overtly controlling” yet conscious of his limited ability to know what has happened and give an explanation for why.⁹¹ He undercuts his own narrative’s claim to truthfulness as a self-conscious storyteller while telling his story as a first-person narrator. The authority of the knowing subject, which is supposed to be at the center of historical or autobiographical narrative, is then replaced by “a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain,” since history is “that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge” (108).

Moreover, Swift twists the autobiographical project by placing Tom within a personal time of crisis instead of a secure closing position assumed traditionally by the

⁹⁰ Roland Barthes. “The Death of the Author.” *Image, music, text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 148.

⁹¹ Hutcheon. 117.

autobiographer.⁹² Faced with the loss of his position as a history teacher in the narrative present, Tom revisits a string of events of the 1940s from his adolescent sexual experimentation with Mary Metcalf through his half brother Dick's murder of Freddie Parr and consequent suicide by drowning. The juxtaposition of past and present in Tom's personal and familial stories not only disrupts the chronological flow of events, but also challenges the narrative of becoming based on the traditional conception of subjectivity as "the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past."⁹³

If what Foucault terms "the founding function of the subject" is required for continuous history, it is no surprise that we have a disjunctive narrative with the past and the present juxtaposed in *Waterland*, whose self-conscious narrator Tom Crick is a subject in a time of crisis. Foucault argues, "Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought."⁹⁴ The disjunctive narrative then draws attention not to the act of remembering as the synthetic activity of the subject to restore everything that has been dispersed over time in a reconstituted unity, but to what is not fully integrated and left as fragments or gaps in the process of narrativizing what has happened.

⁹² Landow. 205.

⁹³ Michel Foucault. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977. 153. Requoted from Hutcheon.

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. 12.

Tom Crick, who looks back on the past from a present moment of crisis, seems to exemplify what Ian Baucom describes as the “backward-glancing English man” in his longing for a glorious past in the modern English literature of nostalgia:

Melancholy and loss are among the most privileged tropes of a romantic and postromantic canon of English letters, as is the image of the backward-glancing English man or woman, domestic avatar of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, turning a resentful back on the present and a teary eye toward the image of a dying England, whose death it has been the frequently self-appointed fate of generations of English writers to contemplate.⁹⁵

The tone of melancholy and loss is prevalent in the novel whose main protagonist and narrator Tom Crick is telling stories to retrieve what has been lost. Nicholas Tredell criticizes Swift for turning a blind eye to the contemporary reality of England torn with cultural tensions caused by class, gender, and racial issues. Swift’s England, Tredell argues, is one in which “images of past, problematic glories (the British Empire, the Industrial revolution, the Second World War) cast a warm, nostalgic glow over an alien present.”⁹⁶

While *Waterland* is set in the countryside whose relatively monotonous landscapes hide the presence of postcolonial immigrants and social unrest in urban areas,

⁹⁵ Ian Baucom. *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999. 175.

⁹⁶ Nicholas Tredell, “Graham Swift’s Limitations,” *The Oxford Quarterly* 1.4 (1997), 37-41. Requoted from Raphael Ingelbien. “‘England and Nowhere’: Contestations of Englishness in Philip Larkin and Graham Swift.” *English: The Journal of the English Association* 48.190 (1999): 33.

however, it is unusual as such in that the novel's portrayal of the Fens is far from the pastoral and idyllic images associated with the "distinctively English aesthetic of the rural locale."⁹⁷

And what are the Fens, which so imitate in their levelness the natural disposition of water, but a landscape which, of all landscapes, most approximates to Nothing? ...And every Fen-child, who is given picture-books to read in which the sun bounces over mountain tops and the road of life winds through heaps of green cushions, and is taught nursery rhymes in which persons go up and down hills, is apt to demand of its elders: Why are the Fens flat? (13)

As implied in the second epigraph, which evokes the opening scenes of death and guilt in *Great Expectations*, the Fens do not provide Tom Crick even the psychological consolation expected from an adult's return to the landscapes of youth.⁹⁸ The body of Freddie Parr, which floated down the Leem to disturb the nothing-landscape of the Fens, gives an ominous signal for childhood memories of guilt and secrets.

Tom Crick's self-reflexive questioning of history turns to meditations on temporality as he is engaged with the act of remembering, the act of looking back to retrieve what is lost. Tom argues that the modern belief in history as progress is an illusion since "the great so-called forward movements of civilization, whether moral or technological, have invariably brought with them an accompanying regression" (135).

⁹⁷ Baucom. 174.

⁹⁸ Smethurst. 157-8.

The “Idea of Progress” based on technological development proves only one-sided since modern discoveries and inventions have led to forms of barbarity and violence. As Benjamin puts it, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”⁹⁹ Nostalgia is also a “bastard but pampered child” of the idea of history as progress:

And where history does not undermine and set traps for itself in such an openly perverse way, it creates this insidious longing to revert. It begets this bastard but pampered child, Nostalgia. How we yearn – how you may one day yearn – to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong. How we yearn even for the gold of a July evening on which, though things had already gone wrong, things had not gone as wrong as they were going to. How we pine for Paradise. For mother’s milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age. (136)

Thus, the nostalgic desire to restore the past is a historical emotion derived from the modern conception of historical time as a forward movement. In one of his lessons on the French Revolution, Tom turns around the conventional notion of revolution as a transformative break from the past and insists that the revolutionary desire for a new beginning is based on a nostalgic yearning for the Golden Age that has been lost: “every revolution contains within it an opposite if less obvious tendency: the idea of a return”

⁹⁹ Benjamin. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” 255-56.

(137). The imagined future in utopian thinking is mirrored by the imagined past in nostalgic yearning, which is driven by a desire to project a time and place different from that of the present condition: our vision for the future turns out to be “very often the image of some lost, imagined past” (141).

What Baucom terms “an allegorical historiography of loss and redemption” concerns a struggle to define and locate England’s essential identity in the national past against the depredations of a metropolitan and imperial modernity. England is pictured as always already lost, wounded, or vanishing in the tradition of melancholic discourses of nostalgia, as Raymond Williams suggests in *The Country and the City*. This nostalgic memory conjures a past which acquires the status of authenticity through its absence, and sets “an injunctive politics of return” in a struggle of the country against the city, or of the past against the present.¹⁰⁰ While seemingly standing opposite to the narrative of progress, discourses of nostalgia share with it a totalizing conception of time in the struggle to align the present and the future to the imagined past.

A “glorious past” is evoked when Tom Crick recounts the rise and fall of the Atkinsons in an “accelerated version of a Victorian novel.”¹⁰¹ The story of the “Idea-conceiving” Atkinsons is emblematic of a national narrative of progress and of the modern narrative of an idealistic revolutionary turning into the founder of an empire as suggested through parallels made between Napoleon and Thomas Atkinson, “a living emblem of the spirit of Albion” (72). Tom follows the march of the “Atkinson machine” (85), a process of expanding the family business of farming to include brewery,

¹⁰⁰ Baucom. 35-6.

¹⁰¹ Ingelbien. 39-40.

drainage, and the Leem Navigation and build a local empire, in step with the imperial expansion of Britain. Thus, Tom's narrative establishes "the synecdochic relationship between the Atkinson empire and the Empire of Great Britain"¹⁰² by portraying the expansion and decline of the entrepreneurial Atkinson family's local empire with close links to the main posts in "a traditional account of nineteenth and twentieth-century British history familiar to anyone who has studied British history at school after the World War Two"¹⁰³;

How many times does the Union Jack flutter above the arched and motto-inscribed entrance to the New Brewery to mark some occasion of patriotic pride? How many times do George and Alfred and Arthur pause in their boardroom addresses, hands on lapels, to allude to some new instance of imperial prowess? And how often do those barrels and bottles of Atkinson Ale find new wonders to celebrate? 'The Grand '51'; 'The Empress of India'; 'The Golden Jubilee'; 'The Diamond Jubilee'...? (93)

Although giving alternative history lessons by making connections between great events in modern and British history and those in the local history of the Fens, Tom is not proposing "an alternative history of England, a regionalist challenge to traditional British historiography."¹⁰⁴ What he is doing instead is mixing the emblematic narrative

¹⁰² Craps. 79.

¹⁰³ Malcolm. 103.

¹⁰⁴ Ingelbien. 41.

of progress in the Fens with stories of others, which are not recorded in the official history. Tom questions traditional historical accounts centered on protagonists: “And did I not bid you remember that for each protagonist who once stepped on to the stage of so-called historical events, there were thousands, millions, who never entered the theatre—who never knew that the show was running—who got on with the donkey-work of coping with reality?” (40).

Tom’s account of local history through his paternal and maternal ancestors, the Cricks and the Atkinsons, overlaps with his explorations of the limits of history in the form of the boundary between fact and fiction, the symbolic and the imaginary: “While the Atkinsons made history, the Cricks spun yarns” (17). If the Atkinson men’s activities embody the world of “good dry textbook history,” the Cricks, who were “at best, pump-operators, lock-keepers, humble servants of their masters” (17), belong to the world of “old swamps of myth”—“mystery-making and speculation, secrets and idle gossip” (86). Despite his insistence on the need to disentangle history from fairytale and struggle to retain “some kind of hold over the symbolic domain,”¹⁰⁵ Tom’s factual account of the local march of progress is undercut by the constant intrusion of local rumors and legends, the imaginary and supernatural, such as “the Singing Swans of Wash Fen Mere; the Monk of Sudchurch; the Headless Ferryman of Staithe” (18), which cannot be contained by the languages and conceptual tools of the disciplinary practice of history. Despite his assertion that the value of history as a discipline lies in helping us to “to be

¹⁰⁵ Ben Knights. *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction*. New York: Macmillan, 1999. 173.

realistic” (108), Tom comes to the conclusion that “history is a yarn” after looking into history for an explanation (62);

Only to uncover in this dedicated search more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with; only to conclude forty years later—notwithstanding a devotion to the usefulness, to the educative power of my chosen discipline—that history is a yarn. And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark? (62)

The “old swamps of myth” stand for subaltern histories that include not only the pasts of subordinate or minority groups but also those of the dominant group put aside in the writing of official history. The narrative of national progress through the line of Atkinson patriarchs is haunted by the ghostly presence of Sarah Atkinson, Thomas Atkinson’s wife, who loses her mind and voice after an incident of domestic violence, and whose “spectral visitations” (102) after death are occasionally witnessed. Ghostly women, whose unrecorded lives and voices form gaps on the edges of historical discourses as part of the unsaid and unspoken, return from the “old swamps of myth” to haunt Tom’s present, set in a suburban area of London in 1980, whose Thatcherite Utilitarian ethos finds history useless and in which Mary, Tom’s wife, steals a baby from a Safeways supermarket, a consumerist paradise: “Do not ghosts prove – even rumours,

whispers, stories of ghosts – that the past clings, that we are always going back...?” (103).

Tom’s model of land-reclamation, figured as a process of “scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind” (346), is based on his self-conscious knowledge of the discursive limits of his historical inquiry: “it’s the inexplicable that keeps him jabbering on nineteen to the dozen like this and scurrying further and further into the past” (109). The novel incorporates the tension between his desire to find an explanation and his realization of the limits of his explanatory power into Tom’s disjunctive narrative marked with ellipses, breaks, and pauses. Instead of constructing a full historical narrative as a totalizing scheme of explanation, Swift presents a narrative porous with gaps and discontinuities, through which what cannot be contained in rational terms returns as what belongs to the realm of “dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky” (108). The ‘water-land’ opposition in the title, which is used to epitomize a conflict between nature and culture in the history of drainage in the fenland, implies a struggle against the unceasing erosion of “the old swamps of myth” into the solid ground of “good dry textbook” (86).

The natural landscapes of the Fens are thus used metaphorically in the novel’s presentation of different kinds of “making” history. Seen as a metaphor for the process in which “history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable” (208), the borderland illustrates Certeau’s redefinition of history as a “work on margins” in consideration of the tension between the real and discourse in historical practice.¹⁰⁶ Certeau reformulates

¹⁰⁶ De Certeau. *The Writing of History*. 40.

history as a heterology, a discourse on the other, thus to explore the boundaries of modern history as established through differentiation and exclusion to make a historical discourse intelligible. The process of land-reclamation Tom presents as his humble model of progress resembles the dynamic of historiographical process, which Certeau describes as “a return of the repressed, that is, a return of what, at a given moment, has *become* unthinkable in order for a new identity to *become* thinkable”¹⁰⁷;

There’s this thing called progress. But it doesn’t progress, it doesn’t go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It’s progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn’t go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires. (336)

Through the “process of human siltation” (10), Tom is attempting to redefine “the equivocal gift of history” as a complex way of temporal thinking. His paradoxical statement that “he looked back in order to look forward” (126) needs to be distinguished from the kind of “injunctive politics of return” in nostalgic discourses as defined by Baucom. In offering a definition of man as “the animal which asks why,” Tom connects the nostalgic desire to go back to the time before things went wrong, a longing for a new

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 4.

beginning, with discontent with the present, “a sense that all is not well” (106). Rather than turning a resentful back on the present, however, he turns to problematizing the present; “What is this indefinable zone between what is past and what is to come; this free and airy present tense in which we are always longing to take flight into the boundless future?” (60). What Tom is trying to do is to approach the question of the “here and now” through the act of looking back to look forward.

As Tom warns his class, his model of progress should not be mistaken for the land-reclamation as a process of building an empire in the Fens by the Atkinsons. The project as a process of transforming the Fens and reorganizing the local and national space lays “the evidentiary groundwork for the historical metanarrative of ‘progress’ within the book.”¹⁰⁸ In recounting the local story of modern development through the march of the Atkinson machine, Tom shows that the process not only transforms material conditions and social relations, but also projects a certain kind of temporal and geographical imagination.

The local narrative of progress in the Fens connects moments in the territorial expansion of the Atkinson empire when each Atkinson man projects his vision, and his identity as a modern subject, against both space and time. William Atkinson, conferring his vision for the future of their family business on his son Thomas, looks down from a high ground “in an expansive and prophetic manner” (67) and opens a map to envision a place to be created through drainage. This scene shows a particular kind of spatial imagination William, a modern subject moved by “that noble and impersonal Idea of

¹⁰⁸ Bedggood. 207-8.

Progress,” employs in reorganizing space and projecting a place in new spatial relations with his entrepreneurial spirit. In this process of remapping space through a network of newly established institutions, the region and the nation form one continuum which imposes a totalizing conception of time and space:

Have they not brought improvement to a whole region, and do they not continue to bring it? Do they not travail long and indefatigably in the council chamber as well as in the boardroom, for the welfare of the populace? Have they not established, out of their own munificence, an orphanage, a town newspaper, a public meeting-hall, a boys’ school (black uniform), a bath-house – a fire station? And are not all these works, and others, proof of that great Idea that sways them; proof that all private interest is subsumed by the National Interest and all private empires do but pay tribute to the Empire of Great Britain? (92-3)

Arthur Atkinson, elected Member of Parliament for Gildsey and a “staunch advocate of forward imperial policies” (157), stands not only a master of the present but also a servant of the future that is “a perpetuation of the present” (94).

The Leem Navigation inaugurates “the process by which this once obscure Fenland town gained its place in the Nation – if not, indeed, the World” (171). A geography of imagination and a geography of management, “two related mappings, two intertwined yet distinct geographies,” interact in this process of a local town on “a backward and trackless wilderness” (67) being located in the continuum of national

history and space, a process in which the history of land-reclamation in the Fens becomes confused with the Empire of Great Britain. Subjects, located in a place created through a net of modern disciplinary institutions such as a public meeting-hall, a school, and a fire-station, project their positions in the spatial continuum that stretch out unlimited.

To project oneself against infinite space assumes a universal subject in universal time. The novel places Tom in the narrative's present-time in Greenwich, "a suburb of London noted for its historical features: a Royal Observatory; a park where Henry VIII once hunted; a former palace turned Maritime Museum; not to mention the dry-docked Cutty Sark, bowsprit permanently pointing to the Isle of Dogs" (123). The Royal Observatory with "the locked-up collections of antique chronometers, astrolabes, sextants, telescopes – instruments for measuring the universe" (147) – puts London at the origin of universal time by marking the line of zero longitude :

On the top of Greenwich Hill, in Greenwich Park, stands an Observatory, founded by Charles II to search the mysteries of the stars. By the Observatory, set in the asphalt, much bestridden and photographed by visiting sightseers, a metal plate marks the line of longitude 0°. Near longitude 0°, perched on a plinth, becloaked and tricornered, stands General Wolfe, in bronze, staring to the Thames. And beneath General Wolfe, imitating his vigilant pose, stands the history teacher, in coat and scarf, taking in for the umpteenth time the famous view. The Maritime Museum (relics of Cook and Nelson); the Naval College

(painted ceiling depicting four English monarchs). History's toy-cupboard. The pastime of past time. The history teacher himself, here in Greenwich at the head of unruly end-of-term outings. The river: a steel serpent coiling through clutter – derelict wharves and warehouses, decaying docks... (129)

A connection between Britain's imperial expansion and centrality in the world and the scientific measurement of space and time, the site is significant as a historical site for England's grand narrative of progress. The Greenwich meridian is part of reference systems for marking the modern world in a net of geographical coordinates.¹⁰⁹ The Observatory, figured in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) as a symbol of the global centrality of the British capital, has become "the linchpin on which the world time system has rested, and builds Eurocentrism into global cognitive structures."¹¹⁰ The adoption of a coordinated world network and standard time enhanced the identity of a nation imagined in synchronic unity and continuity and not surprisingly, facilitated military mobilization when the world would go to war in 1914, rather than engendering cooperation and peace as supporters of standard time anticipated.¹¹¹

Critics point out that Gildsey stands metonymically for England. The Ouse flows "out of the heart of England" (146), and as Wheeler puts it, Swift's imaginary town of Gildsey is "umbilically tied" to Greenwich by the line of zero longitude.¹¹² By reading the zero longitude as a sign of nothingness, Ingelbien finds a metaphorical link between

¹⁰⁹ Malcolm. 105. Smethurst. 166.

¹¹⁰ Knights. 171.

¹¹¹ Stephen Kern. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. 12.

¹¹² Wheeler. 68.

the nothing-landscape of the Fens and the nothingness that Swift locates at the center of England. However, an obsession with nothingness does not always mean a negation of Englishness since it can be yet another nostalgic lament about ‘England gone.’¹¹³ As discussed above, the nothing-landscape of the Fens as a borderland is used in Tom’s narrative and reflections on the limits of history to illustrate history as a “work on margins.” In this view, the sign of nothing should not be read simply as the absence or negation of reality, but as a gap produced in the dynamic of historical narrativization. Poised in tension between his struggle to hold what is being told in a meaningful structure and his self-conscious play with the limits of such an effort, Tom makes constant gestures toward the gap between sign and meaning as an opening for different significations.

The motto, “Ex Aqua Fermentum,” which Thomas Atkinson chose for his company’s emblem of the crossed barley ears over a symbolic representation of water, is supposed to mean ‘Out of Water, Ale’ or ‘Out of Water, Activity.’ Tom Crick points out it can be unintentionally interpreted as ‘Out of Water, Perturbation’ (86), thus to hint at the internal erosion of the Atkinson machine in the process of building an empire. The narrative of progress is “perturbed” by the unsettling presence of “ex-centric” figures such as Sarah Atkinson, Mary Metcalf, and Dick Crick. The “ex-centric,” which Hutcheon defines as something “ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied,” poses a threat of vacancy to the seeming full narrative of modernity as progress and contests the language of centering by questioning binaries such as center and

¹¹³ Ingelbien. 42, 44.

periphery.¹¹⁴ In the novel, these “ex-centric” characters are portrayed in such terms that suggest their affinity with nature or natural history, which is used metaphorically to stand for what exceeds the limits of representation and defies the coherent order of a narrative with origins and ends: “What is this thing that takes us back, either via catastrophe and confusion or in our heart’s desire, to where we were? Let’s call it Natural History” (137).

Figures on the margins of the narrative of progress, the subaltern characters mark fissures and ruptures in the homogenizing process of modernization. Losing their mind or born with a “potato-head,” these figures are deprived of voice to tell their stories and appear a cipher under guises in the symbolic terrain of history. In the incident of domestic violence, for which “no first-hand account exists yet which is indelibly recorded in innumerable versions in the annals of Gildsey” (76), Sarah Atkinson is struck by Thomas Atkinson, a jealous husband who suspects his young wife of cheating on him, to fall and knock her head against the corner of a table on a night in 1820 when she is thirty-seven. This eruption of uncontrolled raw emotions, which was not envisioned by the ambitious “Idea-conceiving” younger Thomas, halts the forward march of the Atkinson machine. The remorseful husband, who once pored over “the topography of the Fens and the innumerable complexities of drainage, flood control and pumping systems,” sets out to study the “even more intricate topography” of the brain and the nervous system with “their own networks of channels and ducts and their own dependence on the constant distribution of fluids,” only to discover that the human mind

¹¹⁴ Hutcheon. 60-61.

is “an internal land which cannot be redeemed, cannot be reclaimed, once it is lost” (80). Sarah will live the rest of her life till her death at ninety-three as a vigilant figure in “the paradoxical pose of one who keeps watch – but over nothing” (78) – by the window of the upper room like a “mad woman in the attic” in Victorian novels. A cipher that belies the universal topographical system of modern science and knowledge, Sarah remains silent and vacant throughout Tom Crick’s narrative to be featured in rumors and legends for diverse readings such as “Guardian Angel, Holy Mother, Saint Gunnhilda-come-again” and even an icon of the nation, “an intrepid Britannia” (94).

There is another “internal land” with its own “networks of channels and ducts,” which Tom Crick explores out of pubescent curiosity during the summertime of 1942, a time shadowed by the signs of the Second World War. As Cooper points out, *Waterland* composes “a feminized geography and a geography of femininity” to articulate the mutuality of sexual and imperialist drives.¹¹⁵ Mary’s body, a “seductive object of phallic energy,”¹¹⁶ is linked to the fenland as vehicle for the making of history: “women are equipped with a miniature model of reality,” Tom tells his pupils, “an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to happen, and to issue in consequence. In which dramas can be brewed, things can be hatched out of nothing” (42). In his exploration of Mary’s “hole,” Tom finds it not simply empty space as falsely suggested by the nickname, but “a moist labyrinth of inwardly twisting, secret passages” whose configuration and texture changes as he advances. Tom’s narrative thus makes metonymic associations between inner and outer spaces to explore the question of

¹¹⁵ Cooper. 372-3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 387.

boundary between self and other, subject and object in de-centering the narrative of progress by reconstructing it as intertwined with stories of others.

The novel suggests that “curiosity” links our sexual explorations and our desire to tell stories;

Supposing it’s curiosity – which inspires our sexual explorations and feeds our desire to hear and tell stories – which is our natural and fundamental condition. Supposing it’s our insatiable and feverish desire to know about things, to know about each other, always to be sniff-sniffing things out, which is the true and rightful subverter and defeats even our impulse for historical progression. Have you ever considered that why so many historical movements, not only revolutionary ones, fail, fail at heart, is because they fail to take account of the complex and unpredictable forms of our curiosity? Which doesn’t want to push ahead, which always wants to say, Hey, that’s interesting, let’s stop awhile, let’s take a look-see, let’s retrace – let’s take a different turn? What’s the hurry? What’s the rush? Let’s *explore*. (194)

Curiosity, “the true and rightful subverter,” is here defined as an insatiable desire that drives one to break out of the centered structure of selfhood and know about things and others; what makes people take a turn off of the forward march of history, pause and retrace to explore different paths. As shown in the digressive episode of curious people’s “quasi-mythological quest for the genesis of the eel” (199), another example of “Natural

History,” however, the subversive desire is ambiguous in that its most “unrealistic” searches after the unknown seek to place the unknown within the framework of human knowledge. The contradictory movement of curiosity can be translated into the dynamic of historiography and narrative proposed by Tom’s model of progress, in which the strain of storytelling inspired by the subversive desire to “explore” gaps is in tension with that of narrativization as a way of ordering chaos and covering the “empty space” with the “comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories” (63).

Tom Crick suggests that the study of history as inspired by this subversive desire is the “very counteraction of making it” (194). If telling stories can be a different form of agency within history, its power lies in enabling those who tell stories to explore an alternative path between the threat of Nothingness and History as “the Grand Narrative.” In the episode of Johannes Schmidt, a Danish oceanographer and ichthyologist in quest for the breeding ground of the European Eel as “a votary of curiosity” (200), the mystery of the reproductive cycle is figured as something that contests the geography and topography of the evolutionary model. The unfathomable mysteries of the reproductive are thus linked to the modern terror induced by the apprehension of the sublime Here and Now, an abyss of meaninglessness, which threatens to unsettle the artifice of civilization;

Children, there’s something which revolutionaries and prophets of new worlds and even humble champions of Progress (think of those Atkinsons and their poor living fossil of a Sarah) can’t abide. Natural history, human nature. Those weird

and wonderful commodities, those unsolved mysteries of mysteries. Because just supposing – but don't let the cat out of the bag – this natural stuff is always getting the better of the artificial stuff. Just supposing – but don't whisper it too much abroad – this unfathomable stuff we're made from, this stuff that we're always coming back to – our love of life, children, our love of life – is more anarchic, more seditious than any Tennis-Court Oath ever was. That's why these revolutions always have a whiff of the death-wish about them. That's why there's always a Terror waiting round the corner. (205-6)

Curiosity is thus two-sided: it can lead one to mind-teasing meditations and to the writing of history books, or it will reveal the sublime Here and Now, which often appears “dressed in terror” (51). Mary's itch of curiosity leads her to encounter terror in the form of her traumatic abortion at Martha Clay's cottage where her inner space is invaded and voided when Martha sucks out the fetus, “what the future's made of” (308), through “a length of hollow reed” (308). This traumatic experience turns Mary, who used to be a desiring subject as well as a “desirable woman” (121), into a “disempowered object of history's baffling vicissitudes.”¹¹⁷ If the “reproductive trauma” disrupts “the teleological narrative of beginnings and ends, the biological-historical fable of centered structure,” Tom's narrative is an effort to find a way to look forward to a future alternative to the aborted one, which was symbolically contained in Mary's uterus, in his struggle to put things into perspective. Mary punishes herself with a three-

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 390.

year self-confinement for voluntary penance and transforms from “a bright and eager pupil with a thirst for knowledge” and a girl “adventurous, inquisitive, unrestrainable” (117) to a woman who becomes “realistic” (127) in her marriage life, which Tom says would be “a sort of fenland” (118).

By telling stories as a way of coping with the fear of nothing, Tom is resisting resorting to “short cuts to Salvation” (108), a timeless realm of Utopia, and trying to find openings for a future while biding in the realm of historical time through the act of looking backward to look forward. Fredric Jameson expresses his discontent with the postmodernist emphasis on differences and “little narratives” in his lament for the disappearance of genuine historicity as “the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future”¹¹⁸ in the postmodern age. He holds that historical matters can “recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story.” This single story of “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” turns into the story of “inevitable failure” since “History is what hurts,” Jameson acknowledges, “it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention.”¹¹⁹ The story of the rise and fall of the Atkinson family is retold in Tom’s narrative to dramatize and at the same time problematize the overwhelming sense of Necessity inherent in this sublime sense of history as what sets “inexorable limits.”

¹¹⁸ Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 18.

¹¹⁹ Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. 19, 102.

Homi Bhabha finds an imperialist drive inherent in such a unitary narrative of history: “The demand that figures at the centre of the originary myth of colonialist power,” Bhabha argues, “is the demand that the space it occupies be unbounded, its reality *coincident* with the emergence of an imperialist narrative and history, its discourse *non-dialogic*, its enunciation *unitary*, unmarked by the trace of difference.”¹²⁰

The story of Ernest Atkinson, Tom’s grandfather, set in “a culminatory period leading to that mythical long hot Edwardian summer so dear to the collective memory of the English” (157), a time overshadowed by economic deterioration and signs of the First World War, shows how the future envisioned in the forward march of history rests on the imperialist expansion of its legacy, a process in which marks of internal difference are erased through a projection of homogenized space. The first Atkinson who assumes his legacy “without the assurance of its inevitable expansion, without the incentive of Progress” (157), Ernest turns rebellious against it, critical of the “visions of Empire” (161) promoted by his own father, Arthur Atkinson, “a staunch advocate of forward imperial policies” (157). Ernest’s story indeed epitomizes history as “what hurts,” as his desire to turn away from what seems inevitable is thwarted by the weight of his legacy. When his reformist desire to turn his countrymen from the impending crisis only meets jeers from the town people who, intoxicated with the jingoistic mood of the time, don’t share his fear for the future, Ernest makes “a headlong retreat, backwards, inwards, to Paradise” (220) with his disgust for humanity. The homogenizing drive of the

¹²⁰ Homi Bhabha. “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalences and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817.” *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 115.

“patriarchal, obviously phallogocentric forces,”¹²¹ Cooper points out, is redirected towards “an interior space of desire”; Ernest withdraws from all the public activities into the timeless realm of desire to seek salvation in the beauty of his daughter Helen: “when fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it’s like tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it’s like a stream wanting to flow backwards” (228).

In looking backward to look forward, Tom reconstructs the Victorian narrative of progress as part of his effort to work through the past traumatic events by making stories out of them: “First there is nothing; then there is happening. And after the happening, only the telling of it” (329). Telling stories of what happened helps one to cross into the “safe, sane realm of hindsight.” Unlike Tom, Mary turns to a shortcut to salvation when her repressed memory of the traumatic happening returns to uncover the empty space beneath the “flat and uniform terrain of thirty years of marriage” (127). Stuck “in the midst of events” (329), she ends up being locked in a mental hospital for psychiatric treatment after a trial. The “gift of amnesia,” Tom maintains, would “only release us from the trap of the question why into the prison of idiocy” (108). Tom’s “hindsight,” however, does not provide a safe and sane realm for the reader as it is constantly interrupted with scenes or reflective comments in the present-time to remind the reader of the place of the remembering subject. In other words, the novel’s disjunctive narrative reveals the retroactive act of rewriting history as an act of signification, which opens up the process of historical narrativization, which Slavoj Žižek calls “a symbolization, a

¹²¹ Cooper. 380.

symbolic integration of meaningless imaginary traces”¹²² for possibilities of different readings.

Dick Crick, another ex-centric character, is portrayed with layers of ambiguous suggestions out of which it is impossible for the reader to draw one final meaning. He is the last Atkinson male, born out of Ernest Atkinson’s incestuous relationship with his daughter Helen, but grows up to be a true descendent of “his dogged, water-taming, land-preserving Crick ancestors” (282). Imprisoned in his idiocy and living in the ‘here and now,’ he has an affinity with nature and the “gift of amnesia” (108). On the other hand, he has a kinship with things mechanical to the extent he, “a sort of machine” (38) himself, resembles his motor-bike, “the thing Dick understood most intimately and cherished most dearly, a motor-bike, in its brainless efficiency, in its mechanical animation, bearing a close resemblance to Dick himself” (243). An “eel-like” phallic figure as implied in his name, he was conceived out of Ernest Atkinson’s incestuous relationship with his daughter Helen to be ‘the Saviour of the World’ but born to become an ironic end to the local narrative of progress in the Fens. When he dives into water never to come back after finding out about his paternal origin, he is, in his death, connected to St Gunnhilda, the fenland’s patron saint, and to Sarah Atkinson (118), who “dived ‘like a very mermaid’ beneath the water never to surface again” (104).

It is no surprise that critics read him in contradictory terms. Dick is a child of ‘progress,’¹²³ who embodies the posthistorical ‘Nostalgia’ which constitutes a

¹²² Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989. 55.

¹²³ Judith Wilt. *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990. 112.

phallogocentrism.¹²⁴ He is both “a monstrous personification of the resistant sublimity of the Fens”¹²⁵ and a product of twentieth-century war.¹²⁶ Dick is figured in such a way that he unsettles the dualistic terms developed in Tom’s stories. This ambiguity of signification sets up Dick, a figure of hybridity, as an allegorical sign in counter-position to “the idols and icons, the emblems and totems of history.” The symbolic value of emblems and tokens is kept intact regardless of the historical time and place in which they are located. Tom explains it by taking as an example the “famous tricoloured flag” which became the portable token of revolution “though it was to be waved in the decades to come through two Empires and to find itself flying more and more before the gusty and oppressive winds of nationalism, and even to be crossed in fellowship, in 1904, with the likewise red, white and blue flag of (the old enemy) imperialist and monarchical Britain” (179). By telling the stories of ex-centric characters, Swift re-introduces the trace of difference erased in the “unitary” narrative of progress into the center of imperialist power and shows how the postmodernist revision of history involves the “displacement of symbol to sign,”¹²⁷ that is, detecting the process of signification that underlies the supposed unity of sign and meaning in the symbolic representation.

I propose to call Tom Crick’s humble model for progress an allegory of progress. Allegory in the sense reinvented by Benjamin is understood as a way of revealing the gap between nature and culture by detecting the act of signification at work in the

¹²⁴ John Schad. “The End of The End of History: Graham Swift’s *Waterland*.” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 38.4 (1992): 912.

¹²⁵ Wheeler. 71.

¹²⁶ Widdowson. 30.

¹²⁷ Bhabha. 115.

symbolic network of history. Benjamin points out, “in comparison to the symbol, the western conception of allegory is a late manifestation which has its basis in certain very fertile cultural conflicts.”¹²⁸ It may be true that the contemporary reality of England is not featured in *Waterland*. In revisiting the past and retelling local and family history, however, the novel problematizes the “here and now” of the nation as a homogeneous unity by suggesting cultural tensions and conflicts repressed in the assimilatory movement of symbol. In retracing a genealogy of what has been forgotten or lost in the continuum of history, Swift does not attempt to provide the kind of counter-narrative that simply negates and substitutes the centered narrative of official history. Instead, he presents the local story of development as an allegory of national and imperialist progress. The movement of demystification, which distinguishes the allegorical from the symbolic representation in Benjamin’s reinvention, is at work in Tom’s disjunctive narrative: the landmark events of national and modern history, separated from the coherent order of time or the centered structure of textbook historical narrative, are interwoven with Tom’s personal and familial stories in “a configuration pregnant with tensions.” In the allegorical story of progress in the novel, Tom grasps the constellation of traces of the past “charged with the time of the now” at a moment of personal and public crisis in his effort to resist the sense of ending dictated in the unitary narrative of “national destiny” (158).

Tom’s narrative as an allegory of progress also refigures the story of the border, which Franco Moretti suggests is the main function of historical novels. Moretti

¹²⁸ Benjamin. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. 197.

reformulates the definition of historical fiction in terms of “a phenomenology of the border” and argues that historical novels tell “not just stories ‘of’ the border, but of its erasure” in picturing the nation-state as in the process of historical transition.¹²⁹ The text makes scattered allusions to the ‘outside.’ The advance of commerce by the Atkinsons under imperial prowess, for instance, is described to suggest its dependence on the network of channels and routes for colonial trades that connects the presence of colonies to the ‘center’: “a special pale brew known as Atkinson India Ale was being regularly shipped thousands of miles to Bombay” (92). However, the presence of outer spaces is displaced in the novel’s focus on the allegorical link between London, the center, and the imaginary town of Gildsey and the Fens. Swift’s spatial imaginary in *Waterland* turns inwards and traces stories of internal periphery through the allegorical story of progress. In retelling local history, Tom links the process of local development to that of national expansion as a temporal and geographical continuum, but his disjunctive narrative presents an alternative configuration of sites of memory pulled out of the continuum.

Ending the chapter about the history of the Ouse, a river which “flows out of the heart of England to the Wash and the North Sea” (146), with an allusion to the events of 1943, Swift opens the following chapter with a bench in Greenwich Park, “some fifty yards from the line of zero longitude” (146), on which Mary tells Tom about a revelation from God that she’s going to have a baby. Thus the Fens and Greenwich, the past and the present, come together under the sign of zero. The burden of personal trauma is

¹²⁹ Moretti. *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*. 38, 40.

overlapped with the burden of public history as the couple seems to be repeating a time-old dramatic scene at the historic site;

Waning light through the trees. A park-keeper's bell. The park must close soon. Soon, everyone must be gone. Purple dusk descending on the Observatory, on the locked-up collections of antique chronometers, astrolabes, sextants, telescopes – instruments for measuring the universe. Glimmering lights on the Thames. Here, in this former royal hunting park where Henry VIII, they say, wooed Anne Boleyn, where in more august, Imperial times the nannies of the well-to-do wheeled their charges to and fro to the sound of band music and swapped their nanny-gossip, he is constrained to utter to his wife those often-used yet mystical, sometimes miracle-working words, 'I love you, I love you.' He is constrained to hug his wife as though to confirm she is still there. For in the twilight it seems that, without moving, she is receding, fading, becoming ghostly. (148)

As Mary recedes into the realm of non-history, this scene brings back the traumatic memory of Mary's abortion at Martha Clay's cottage to the historic site where the idols and emblems of history are collected and preserved. Her abortion at Martha Clay's cottage, a place where history comes to a stop and "the past will go on happening" (304), left her infertile by draining her "empty but fillable vessel" of the hope for the future by violent force. The memory links the sign of nothingness to Mary's "hole" and the

aborted fetus, which was carried in a pail and thrown into the Leem, and to the aborted future for Tom Crick: “in the pail is what the future’s made of” (308).

Martha Clay’s cottage serves not simply as a site of traumatic memory for Mary’s abortion scene in Tom’s narrative. The cottage itself in its temporal and spatial oddity is a traumatic site that disrupts the temporal and spatial continuum of the Empire of Britain, which is supposed to subsume all private interest under the fluttering Union Jack: “Children, have you ever stepped into another world? Have you ever turned a corner to where Now and Long Ago are the same and time seems to be going on in some other place?” (303). It embodies the “old swamps of myth” as it is figured like a witch’s place in a Grimm’s fairy tale;

Once-white plaster over wattle and daub. Earth floor, hard trodden. A turf-fire burning in a brick fireplace. Smell of turf-smoke, smothering even Martha’s Martha-smell (which consists, to be sure, of a good part of turf-smoke). A grid-iron, spits, griddles, pots, trivets; a vast kettle. Set into the fireplace, a rudimentary oven. Two solid-back wooden chairs and a trestle table. Half drawn across one portion of the room, a filthy curtain, part concealing a sheepskin covered bed. A rough wooden dresser. Lamps. Guttered candles in saucers. And that’s all. Because the rest – it’s not like a home at all. It’s full of things people wouldn’t keep inside a home – or that people wouldn’t keep at all. Two monster-barrelled flintlock fowling guns slung on hooks on the fireplace wall. Nets, spades, poles, scythes, sickles, pails. Hanging from a ceiling beam, like

amputated, mummified legs, a pair of long leather waders. But take a look at that ceiling! Look what else it's hung with. It's hung with dead birds. Mallard – a duck and drake – teal, plover, snipe. It's hung with strips of fur and eel-skin, a bloody-mouthed water-rat dangling by its hairy tail. It's hung with nameable and unnameable bunches of leaves, grasses, roots, seed-pods, in every stage of freshness and desiccation. (303)

An uncanny place cluttered with things that transgress the dividing line between the inside and outside of a home, the cottage is a border place on the boundary between nature and culture. As such, it constitutes an “Elsewhere,” the space of and for the Other, which is projected to set the boundary of the “Here” as modern.¹³⁰ It is a place of otherness to be erased in the process of development through which the local town of Gildsey gains its place in the nation and the world. Widdowson suggests the aborted foetus is symbolic of a ‘future’ that was stillborn in the loveless, consumerist postmodern England.¹³¹ Martha’s cottage is allegorical of a past that haunts the present in the homogenous and uniform temporal and spatial order like a nightmare of history and threatens to abort any future as the perpetuation of a present.

Swift draws a geography of memory in *Waterland* by putting sites of memory in contiguity through Tom’s disjunctive narrative, in which “a sense of the past and present together in one” brings “something spectral” into the contemporaneity of the present.¹³²

¹³⁰ Trouillot. 222.

¹³¹ Widdowson. 33.

¹³² Bakhtin. 35.

The “ghostly” that haunts Tom’s traumatic memory and narrative make the domestic space of England “unheimlich,” as Derrida describes it: “The most familiar becomes the most disquieting. The economic or egological home of the *oikos*, the nearby, the familiar, the domestic, or even the national (*heimlich*) frightens itself. It feels itself occupied, in the proper secret (*Geheimnis*) of its inside, by what is most strange, distant, threatening.”¹³³

It is significant that the cottage, an irregularity in the modernizing community as an emerging whole, is set against a museum, “the inevitable outcome of the positivist-historical approach to reality”¹³⁴: “If you ever go to the Fenland Museum in Gildsey (opened in 1964 on a site in Market Street once occupied by the old Gildsey Corn Exchange) you will see a full scale mock-up of an old Fen cottage” (303). The interior of the cottage displays a collection of incongruous items from different historical times which are mixed with no significant connections: “On the dresser, incongruous items: aluminium sauce-pans, a tin of Cerebos salt; pinned to the edge of a shelf, a yellowed photograph cut from a newspaper. Churchill, with a belligerent cigar. Impossible intruders, stray objects from some exhibition of the far-away future...” (304). The display of incongruous and stray objects looks like a pastiche of styles and images from the past, a postmodernist technique Jameson suggests crystallizes the disappearance of historical perspective.¹³⁵

¹³³ Derrida. 144-45.

¹³⁴ Craps. 89.

¹³⁵ Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 18.

Between the burden of history, which imposes the logic of necessity, and postmodern amnesia combined with the museum-ization of history, the novel turns to storytelling as an alternative path. The novel's emphasis on storytelling with its reflections on the limits of history as discourse turns attention to the ethical limits of Tom Crick's narrative. Tom's disjunctive narrative can be seen as a means of delaying the moment to confront and confess his own involvement in the events of 1943 which led to three deaths, including Dick's and his unborn baby's.¹³⁶ In the later part of the novel in which Tom's narrative comes closer to the moment of confession, the gap between Tom as a participant and as an observer and narrator widens, and the silence of the others involved in the events becomes more palpable. Tom states he is telling Mary's story now that "you've stopped and all that is left for anyone else is your story" (116). When he repeatedly stresses later that it is "Mary's story, pieced together and construed by [me]" (248), it makes the reader all the more feel that it is not "her" story, but "very emphatically Tom's."¹³⁷ The traumatic truths, which can be accessed only through fragmentary traces, mark the limits of Tom's storytelling as an effort to re-constitute himself through the act of remembering and retrieve the past in a meaningful structure. Tom's traumatic memory thus sets ethical limits to 'his' story by bringing up the restraint of verisimilitude as an obligation to simulate "history's debt to the people of the past"¹³⁸ or to the silenced of the buried past.

¹³⁶ For a reading of Tom's storytelling in terms of memory and traumatic truths, see Adrian Poole. "Graham Swift and the Mourning After." *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*. Ed. Rod Mengham. Cambridge: Polity, 1999. 161.

¹³⁷ Widdowson. 32.

¹³⁸ Paul Ricœur. "The Interweaving of History and Fiction." *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. 192.

An allegory of progress, proposed by Tom Crick as his humble model for progress and illustrated in Tom's storytelling as human siltation, incorporates and explores the limits of history as part of the process of looking back to look forward. This allegorical approach to history then turns a present as a moment in homogeneous empty time into the time of the "now" with possibilities for alternative constellations. In his reflections on the nature of the present and in his journey into the past as a journey into the future, Tom Crick is telling his stories while resisting "this ever-recurring need to begin again, to wipe the slate, erase the past and look to the sparkling landmarks of the future" (82). *Waterland* does not provide an alternative version of modern British history or an alternative regional history to challenge the official history centered on great events and landmarks. It does not offer any utopian way out of the silts that bog down the march of progress. The novel's allegorical retelling of the modern/national story of progress through local history does not attempt to substitute the signifier of authority at the center of the universalist narrative of progress; instead it creates a spectral effect that can be called "a metonymy of presence"¹³⁹ through the displacement of symbol to sign in the dynamic of historiographical process.

If a sense of melancholic loss permeates Tom's allegorical retelling of the Atkinson empire's rise and decline, it is counteracted by the open structure of storytelling. Looking backward to look forward, Tom is telling his story to his class, particularly to Price, who is like a son to him: "He's my son" (241). The postmodern storyteller has no "counsel" for his listeners but telling them to keep weaving yarns out

¹³⁹ Bhabha. 115.

of traces time leaves behind, but “counsel is,” Benjamin suggests, “less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.”¹⁴⁰ Against the sense of ending Tom asserts that a possibility for redemption lies in telling stories. If the novel reveals the ethical limits of Tom’s story, it is a reminder of the question of perspective that intervenes in the act of remembering as retrieving the traces of the past. Tom’s narrative is thus open to a future in its invitation for different stories and different readings of the constellation of memories Tom seizes hold of at the moment of his crisis.

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin. “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” 86.

CHAPTER III
 STORYTELLING AND MEMORY AS BROKEN MIRROR:
 SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a landmark contemporary historical fiction, explores the question of historicity in the postmodern/postcolonial condition through an allegorical retelling of the national history of Post-Independence India.

A personal biography is fused with the national history of the subcontinent in the novel through the narrator and protagonist Saleem Sinai, who came into the world at the stroke of midnight, "the precise instant of India's arrival at independence." On this 'fated' coincidence is built the novel's main conceit that Saleem is at the center stage of national history with his body falling apart as post-Independence India disintegrates.¹⁴¹ Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his letter to the baby Saleem: "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (122).

A sense of fate looms behind the mysterious union, made "thanks to the occult tyrannies" of clocks, of an individual body and the nation, in which Saleem says he was "left entirely without a say" (9). Saleem is "mysteriously handcuffed to history," his destinies "indissolubly chained" to those of his country (9). With an imminent end, whether literal or symbolic, implied from the beginning, Saleem is telling his story as a struggle against this oppressive sense of destiny or fate. As in Tom Crick's narrative in

¹⁴¹ Aruna Srivastava. "'The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.4 (1989): 63.

Waterland, history is “what hurts” in Saleem’s story intertwined with national history, in which he’s been a victim, “the sort of person to whom things have been done.” Engaged with the “business of remaking” his life through the act of retelling it, Saleem “persists in seeing himself as protagonist” (237): “everything that happened, happened because of me” (133).

In the novel, Saleem tells not only his personal story, but also the story of a generation of one thousand and one children, who were born during the first hour of August 15th, 1947 and called midnight’s children. The number signifying “alternative realities – a number beloved of poets and detested by politicians” (217), midnight’s children, endowed with extraordinary features or talents, arrive at a moment of historical significance and promise as if history “had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time” (195). Born during the hour “somehow outside time” (212), the children with magical gifts represent possibilities for the newly-born nation, but as Saleem adds in a foreshadowing aside, they are “also the children *of the time*: fathered, you understand, by history” (118).

The novel approaches the question of historicity through “a discursive reconfiguration of the relationship between Self and Nation.”¹⁴² The question involves issues of heritage and identity in the postcolonial nation struggling between colonial legacies and alternate paths for its future. When the Midnight Children’s Conference, “a sort of loose federation of equals” Saleem forms with the surviving five hundred eight

¹⁴² Josna E. Rege. “Victim into Protagonist? *Midnight's Children* and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties.” *Studies in the Novel* 29.3 (1997): 342.

out of the one thousand and one children, start to fight with each other over religious or class divisions, Saleem makes a poignant observation by reading irony into the “mirror” image used in the prime minister’s letter: “In this way the M.C.C. fulfilled the prophecy of the Prime Minister and became, in truth, a mirror of the nation; the passive-literal mode was at work, although I railed against it” (255).

Saleem meditates on the question, “How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation?”:

I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term ‘modes of connection’ composed of dualistically-combined configurations’ of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (238)

With his claim to a place at the center of history, Saleem’s desire is to convert the “passive-literal” mode to “the mode of the ‘active-metaphorical,’ which groups together those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history.” However, his narrative, marked by gaps and scraps of memory, tells a different story. In this section, I examine how Saleem’s disjunctive narrative of memory puts into

question the metaphoric union of self and nation and how Saleem refigures places in the imagined space of post-Independence India.

An autobiographical attempt to rewrite his life through hindsight, Saleem's narrative makes it clear that what it seeks in retelling the personal and national history is "memory's truth"; "It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (211).

In retelling the events of the past through his fallible memory, Saleem is not concerned with the past as it was but with a version filtered through his present point of view and subject position. Saleem's insistence on retelling history in his own version goes far even to twist historical facts: "Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date" (166). The fact that Saleem admits to getting the date wrong, however, shows that Rushdie's purpose is not simply in denying the importance of historical facts or undermining traditional notions of historical truth. As Patrick Hogan suggests, on one hand, it points to the fallibility of written histories and to the way historical facts have been distorted by politicians.¹⁴³ On the other hand, Saleem's self-conscious use of errors is to counter-pose the remembered truth to the truth that "is instructed to be" (326) in official history: "in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (166).

¹⁴³ Patrick Colm Hogan. "Midnight's Children: Kashmir and the Politics of Identity." *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 47.4 (2001): 514-15.

With all this emphasis on memory's truth and his own version of reality, Saleem tells his personal and familial history following the timeline of significant historical events. As Timothy Brennan points out, the novel inserts "all the key historical roadmarkers of the Indian postwar period" into Saleem's narrative like textbook lessons in modern Indian history: the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919; the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947; the First Five-Year Plan in 1956; Ayub Khan's coup in Pakistan in 1958; the India-China war of 1962; the India-Pakistan War of 1965; the creation of Bangladesh in 1971; and the Indian 'Emergency' of 1975.¹⁴⁴ What is odd is an omission of Gandhi's national movement from the list; the story of Indian nationalism that grew out of the liberation struggle is excised from Saleem's narration of personal stories intertwined with national history.

Rushdie's allegory in *Midnight's Children*, Kortenaar argues, is "of the nation as already mediated" by official textbook history, "the story of the nation made by middle-class nationalist politicians" and written with "established origins, narrative watersheds, and an agreed-upon chronology of significant events."¹⁴⁵ After opening his memoir with a story of "miraculous conjunction of biological and political nativity,"¹⁴⁶ Saleem recommences his story thirty two years back at the point, as "present" as the "clock-ridden" one, where his grandfather Aadam Aziz, who returned home with an altered vision, "travelled eyes," after five years of medical training abroad, hits his nose against

¹⁴⁴ Timothy Brennan. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. 83

¹⁴⁵ Neil ten Kortenaar. "'Midnight's Children' and the Allegory of History." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.2 (1995): 42.

¹⁴⁶ Jean M. Kane. "The Migrant Intellectual and the Body of History: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." *Contemporary Literature* 37.1 (1996): 95.

a tussock of earth in his attempt to pray. This decision leaves a hole, “a vacancy in a vital inner chamber” (10), in Aadam, “a half-and-halfer” (18) alienated from both the traditional belief of his homeland and his Western friends who believe that India was ‘discovered’ by the Europeans. Saleem’s narrative as a story of postcolonial modernity is thus to be haunted by this splitting of self. “Caught in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief” (12), Aadam is “racked by ambiguity” (42).

Josna E. Rege points out that a sensitivity to the “dualities inherent in postcoloniality” guides Rushdie’s writing; Rushdie accepts the radical ambivalence of the Indian nation and even elevates “condition into method in his metanarrative.”¹⁴⁷ With other postmodernist historical novels, *Midnight’s Children* shares a critical stance toward a positivistic understanding of the past which erases the traces of subjective interpretations that intervene with our approach to the past through its textualized remains. Rushdie’s approach to the question of historicity, however, is complicated with his concern with the dual heritage of the post-independence Indian nation and the Indian English novel in *Midnight’s Children*.

Writing on *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie states that the book is “a novel of memory and about memory.”¹⁴⁸ The novel has a complex form in which Saleem Sinai is writing autobiography in his struggle to find some meaning against the imminent end and at the same time telling his story to Padma, his assistant and listener who works at the pickle factory Saleem owns. With this double position of Saleem as autobiographer and as storyteller, Rushdie explores two aspects of memory: the “remembrance” of a

¹⁴⁷ Rege. 356.

¹⁴⁸ Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1992. 10

particular individual's life from his birth to his death and "reminiscences" of diverse people around the individual. From the start of his story, Saleem longs for meaning: "I must work fast, faster than Sheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (9). This longing for meaning as an autobiographer and storyteller creates a tension in the narrative: Saleem insists on his centrality in telling his story, but the centrality is counteracted by the multiple stories of people through "reminiscences," which diffuses the intended centrality of the narrated story. Saleem continues to add,

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. (9)

As insinuated from the beginning, in which Saleem specifies the time and place of his birth, the novel presents a time-ridden story, throughout which the reader is made to hear different ticking sounds of time linked with a birth or death of a character. A story of personal and national birth and development is based on the idea of homogeneous empty time, which, marked by temporal coincidence and measured by clock and calendar, provides a basis for the unity and continuity of the nation-state as a synchronic totality. The heterogeneity of the people reminisced in Saleem's stories, however, challenges the contemporaneity of national space, whose homogeneity as an

entity in time is based on the idea of history as progress, a view of history “passed on by the ruling British and now part of the Indian national consciousness.”¹⁴⁹

Reading *Midnight's Children* in terms of “a cultural politics that explores the retrospective fabrication of origins,” Clement Hawes points out that the novel is “about nothing, of course, if not the questioning of myths of origins.”¹⁵⁰ At the heart of the metaphorical union of the personal and the national through Saleem lies an ironical twist: the baby of the Sinais, a Kashmiri Muslim couple, was swapped with Hindu street-singer's in the hospital by Mary Pereira, a Catholic midwife who took that decisive step as “her own private revolutionary act” (117) for her Marxist lover Joseph D'Costa. With this twist of fate, Rushdie dramatizes conflict and division within the imagined unity of India as a modern nation. The split inherent in Saleem's identity exposes the “heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself”¹⁵¹ and is a metaphor for the split inherent in the national identity of India.

Homi Bhabha argues that the representation of the nation as a temporal process is problematized by the disjunctive time of its modernity as caught “between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy.”¹⁵² If the novel is seen as Saleem's attempt to produce and reconstitute his subjectivity and India's national identity through his narration, the disjunctive narrative form shows how the pedagogical idea of the nation conceived of in terms of political rationality is fractured in the performance of the narration. Rushdie inscribes and problematizes

¹⁴⁹ Srivastava. 63.

¹⁵⁰ Clement Hawes. “Leading History by the Nose: The Turn to the Eighteenth Century in *Midnight's Children*.” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 39.1 (1993): 159, 148.

¹⁵¹ Michel Foucault. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” 82.

¹⁵² Homi K. Bhabha. 142.

subjectivity in the novel by making Saleem assert his centrality in the recounted story as “a single, insistent, controlling narrator”¹⁵³ and revealing the discursive nature of his subjectivity.

As *Waterland* juxtaposes past and present in Tom Crick’s personal and familial stories, *Midnight’s Children* intersects the narrated past with the narrator’s present in the retrospective act of rewriting and retelling his life. Saleem’s autobiographical memoir is constantly interrupted with questions and remarks by the listener Padma, “the lotus goddess of the present,” who represents India’s peasant class. Saleem explains why Padma is necessary in his narrative; “How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps – kept? – my feet on the ground?” (150). The presence of Padma within the narrative serves to bring Saleem, an upper class male subject preoccupied with memory and grabbed by “the spirit of self-aggrandizement” (174), back into the present world with “shreds and patches of cultural signification.” In other words, it reminds the reader of the fact that particular perspectives of class and gender are embedded in Saleem’s version of history written with his “miracle-laden omniscience.”

A hole or vacancy in indifferent forms is a recurring metaphor in Saleem’s familial history. The hole re-appears when Doctor Aziz is asked to examine a rich man’s daughter, Naseem, through a sheet with a hole in the middle out of propriety. He gradually falls in love with the daughter, Saleem’s grandmother-to-be, segment by

¹⁵³ Hutcheon. 161.

segment, as only one part of her body is allowed to be seen each weekly visit for three years: Dr. Aziz has “come to think of the perforated sheet as something sacred and magical, because through it he had seen the things which had filled up the hole inside him which had been created when he had been hit on the nose by a tussock and insulted by the boatman Tai” (27).

Kane reads this romance plot as a “parable of the postcolony” for showing how the wholeness of India is imaginatively constructed out of fragments¹⁵⁴: India as a modern nation is,

a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God (112).

¹⁵⁴ Kane. 109.

People in various states and kingdoms were asked to bring into existence the new myth of India in its imagined totality by exerting “a phenomenal collective will,” but the romance plot fails since “when the whole is assembled it turns out to be very different from the sum of its parts”¹⁵⁵; Aadam finds out that the “real” Naseem is different from the image of her he has constructed based on the fragmented views of her body parts. The “lure of the lack” incites the fantasy of wholeness, but the imagined totality fails to fulfill people’s “desire for an unattainable cohesive identity.”¹⁵⁶

It needs occasional “rituals of blood” for renewal to maintain the collective fiction of a nation. Aadam Aziz, a man from Kashmir, an independent princely state, does not feel Indian until he is soaked, and thus baptized to become “Indianized” (52), with blood at the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre while trying to be of help as a doctor in Amritsar in 1919. However, “the alienness of blue eyes remains” (107) with Dr. Aziz. Giving a summary of his inheritance, Saleem maintains that his grandfather’s sheet with a hole affected his mother and his own perception of the past: “and above all the ghostly essence of that perforated sheet, which doomed my mother to learn to love a man in segments, and which condemned me to see my own life – its meanings, its structures – in fragments also” (107).

The novel addresses the discursive nature of history with a critical recognition of knowledge as perspective. Saleem challenges the reader to judge whether he is “so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything – to re-

¹⁵⁵ Nalini Natarajan. “Woman, Nation and Narration in *Midnight's Children*.” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York: Routledge, 1999. 82.

¹⁵⁶ Kane. 108-9.

write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role” (166). Saleem’s belief in his centrality has competitors: the Widow, a nickname used in the novel for Indira Gandhi, whose desire for centrality is captured in her campaign slogan, “India is Indira and Indira is India” (420), and Shiva, who works for the Widow when she assumes dictatorial power in 1975 under the guise of state emergency. Saleem invites the reader to read his claim for centrality in comparison with Indira Gandhi’s equation between the State and herself:

Unpalatable, awkward queries: did Saleem’s dream of saving the nation leak, through the osmotic tissues of history, into the thoughts of the Prime Minister herself? Was my lifelong belief in the equation between the State and myself transmuted, in ‘the Madam’s’ mind, into that in-those-days-famous phrase: *India is Indira and Indira is India*? Were we competitors for centrality – was she gripped by a lust for meaning as profound as my own – and was that, was that why? (420).

We can read their similar desire for metaphorical equivalence in terms of parody redefined by Hutcheon as “a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity.”¹⁵⁷ It does not mean that the parody is the novel’s main purpose. In the novel, “a text built upon a series of metaphors” (49), Rushdie puts Saleem’s claim for the metaphoric union of himself and national history in

¹⁵⁷ Hutcheon. 26.

the interdependent and dynamic relationship of metaphorical equivalence and metonymical contiguity.¹⁵⁸ The Widow and Saleem pair is only one of the series of dualistic pairs the novel sets up to invite the reader to meditate on the modes of connection an individual has with history.

Shiva, Saleem's "alter-ego and arch-rival,"¹⁵⁹ is second to Saleem in the order of birth and power among one thousand and one midnight's children and, named after the god of procreation and destruction, stands for the force of violence and repression that threatens to stifle alternative versions of reality. While Saleem connects the midnight's children with his telepathic power and argues for the role of the Midnight Children's Conference as "a third principle" to be "the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma," Shiva insists, "there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world!" Through Shiva, the real son of the Sinais, who was robbed of his place in an upper-class family and had to grow up struggling for life, Rushdie captures "the fearful image of *ressentiment*"¹⁶⁰ and makes him a spokesperson for the Utilitarian ethos as a "principle of life" (304) that guides the modernizing world of post-Independence India: "The world is not ideas, rich boy; the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world, little Snotnose, is things. Things and their makers rule the world" (255).

The reader is invited to read Saleem's hyperbolic style of narration against the attitude of mind Shiva represents:

¹⁵⁸ Mac Fenwick. "Crossing the Figurative Gap: Metaphor and Metonymy in *Midnight's Children*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.3 (2004): 48-9.

¹⁵⁹ Rege. 357.

¹⁶⁰ Brennan. 103.

Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday – these techniques, which are also attitudes of mind, I have lifted – or perhaps absorbed – from the most formidable of the midnight children, my rival, my fellow-changeling, the supposed son of Wee Willie Winkie: Shiva-of-the-knees. They were techniques which, in his case, were applied entirely without conscious thought, and their effect was to create a picture of the world of startling uniformity. (219)

Saleem states that he is self-consciously using the techniques drawn from Shiva. In other words, he is repeating Shiva and the Widow's attitudes of mind but with critical distance. With Shiva, a warrior born with a pair of enormous and powerful knees who becomes a national hero in the India-Pakistan war in 1971, the effect is a vision of the world in a uniform and coherent order; then, is Saleem's ironic use of the techniques to construct and deconstruct it? Is Saleem taking the position of radical relativism in his argument for ambiguity as a third principle?

Throughout Saleem's story, the novel pursues the question of "what's real" as closely bound up with the question of modernity and historical truth. The elements of magical realism the novel employs to combine the factual with the fabulous challenge the limits of the rational terms of literary realism and conventional history, as illustrated in Saleem's literal embodiment of the metaphorical connection between his personal and familial stories and the public history of India. As discussed above, there are two strains

of literary heritage the novel is aligned with: the autobiographical and the tradition of storytelling. I suggest that the novel mixes up the two strains and examines the question of historical truth and representation in its genealogical search for alternative possibilities in the past.

Saleem's autobiographical project of retelling his life intertwined with national history expands to weave a complicated genealogy of his family from the colonial days of his grandfather to the generation of his son, born at the midnight of the Emergency day of 1975 when Indira Gandhi, convicted of election campaign malpractices, suspends all civil rights and puts her opponents into jail. The curse of getting old early recurs in Saleem's family from his grandfather Aadam Aziz, whose old hole reappears and drives him into early dotage, to his father Ahmed Sinai, who becomes immersed in djinn-sodden unreality by his continual failure of business. Dr. Aziz, "Europe-returned" (34), struggles to fuse Western skills and hakimi medicine, "an attempt which would gradually wear him down, convincing him that the hegemony of superstition, mumbo-jumbo and all things magical would never be broken in India, because the hakims refused to co-operate" (67). Ahmed Sinai's alcoholism starts when he moves into one of the four mansions owned by William Methwold, a departing colonial who wants the new Indian residents to play a little game: all the household items and routines should be retained until the moment of Independence. The residents gradually grow accustomed to the Englishman's residences and continue the daily cocktail party even after Independence. During the First and Second Five Year Plan, the government's program for modernization, the Indian bourgeoisie turns white in their "heroic" efforts to take

over hegemony from the British. With his skin paled, Ahmed steadily drifts away from reality while riding “high on the abstract undulations of the money market” (202).

The curse also strikes Saleem: “I felt oppressed by a feeling of having moved directly from an overlong and dribbling childhood into a premature (through still leaky) old age” (284). Saleem’s initiation into adolescence and adulthood is a traumatic experience: he is deprived of his telepathic power and banished from the Midnight Children’s Conference after an operation to drain him of his inflamed sinuses, the source for his power. Tom Crick in *Waterland* had a traumatic initiation into early adulthood, as his adolescence was cut short when Mary got pregnant and had abortion. Tom was still able to achieve maturity as he studied history to find an explanation and became a history teacher, although the stable identity turned out to be an illusion in post-imperial England when the repressed trauma came back to hit him hard. Saleem is deprived of the time of youth and maturity in post-Independence India, a newly-born modern nation in a struggle to find its own path out of colonial legacies.

Saleem’s growing-up story is aligned with the twentieth-century counter-bildungsroman, which shows the regressive move of a cultural symbol of value from youth to adolescence and childhood.¹⁶¹ Moretti explains that the Bildungsroman rises to become the ‘symbolic form’ of modernity when Europe, rushed into modernity, needs to attach a meaning to modernity:

¹⁶¹ Franco Moretti. *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European culture*. London: Verso, 1987. 46.

...youth is 'chosen' as the new epoch's 'specific material sign,' and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity's 'essence,' the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past. (5)

Youth as the sign of modernity is replaced by childhood as a time of possibilities in Saleem's version of India where he is writing a memoir to find meaning with an overwhelming sense of end. The failed adulthood thus applies to the postcolonial nation: the true hope, born with the Independence of India, lies in making a new form of nation different both from the European model and from the old Indian society, but with new possibilities annihilated, India repeats the steps of the European form "as farce" (185). Partha Chatterjee points out, "Here lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of the modern community but in our surrender to the old forms of the modern state."¹⁶²

The novel is more focused on Saleem's childhood days than on his life as an adult: "Whereas it requires nine chapters to cover the two years from the age of nine to the age of eleven spent in India, three chapters cover thirteen years in Pakistan."¹⁶³ Saleem's growing-up into adolescence and adulthood is a process of being drained of hope and possibilities along with the disintegration of India and the subsequent India-

¹⁶² Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. 11.

¹⁶³ Neil ten Kortenaar. *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's children*. Ithaca: McGill-Queen's UP, 2004. 158.

Pakistan War in 1965. In the act of looking back to find some meaning before an imminent end, Saleem's narrative moves from his childhood in Bombay to his failed adulthood in Karachi, Pakistan, "the land of the pure" (316). Although he is watchful of "the empty oblivion of nostalgia" (337), Saleem indeed expresses a longing to "escape backwards" (435), nostalgic for "times of greater possibilities" (436), as his telling comes near the end. However, Saleem is not nostalgic of Bombay as a lost place of plenitude but as a place of his childhood full of possibilities; Saleem says, "If there is a third principle, its name is childhood." He continues to add, however, this childhood as a time with alternative possibilities out of endless dualities "dies; or rather, it is murdered" (256).

In Saleem's imaginary map of the subcontinent recreated through memory, the two places, Bombay and Karachi, stand opposed to each other as "representational spaces" lived through associated images and symbols in Lefebvre's terms¹⁶⁴:

It was, in those days, a city of mirages; hewn from the desert, it had not wholly succeeded in destroying the desert's power. Oases shone in the tarmac of Elphinstone Street, caravanserais were glimpsed shimmering amongst the hovels around the black bridge, the Kala Pul. In the rainless city (whose only common factor with the city of my birth was that it, too, had started life as a fishing village), the hidden desert retained its ancient powers of apparition-mongering, with the result that Karachiites had only the slipperiest of grasps on reality, and

¹⁶⁴ Lefebvre. 42.

were therefore willing to turn to their leaders for advice on what was real and what was not. Beset by illusionary sand-dunes and the ghosts of ancient kings, and also by the knowledge that the name of the faith upon which the city stood meant 'submission,' my new fellow-citizens exuded the flat boiled odours of acquiescence, which were depressing to a nose which had smelt – at the very last, and however briefly – the highly-spiced nonconformity of Bombay. (308)

Bombay, a city with all sorts of religions and deities, is a place of “highly-spiced nonconformity” while Karachi, “a city of mirages” built on desert, exudes “the flat boiled odours of acquiescence.” In the land of the pure, Saleem’s sister, now called Jamila Singer, takes the center stage when she becomes a national celebrity as a singer. Kortenaar points out that there is “a pattern of chiasmic reversal” in Saleem’s and Jamila’s role in Pakistan: Saleem, who was once All-India Radio, loses his powers and is “doomed to be a misfit” (310) when Jamila becomes the “Voice of the Nation” as the “new daughter-of-the-nation.” With his new olfactory gift, Saleem roams for “uglier smells” (315) of the city while Jamila sings patriotic songs with “the blind and blinding devoutness and the right-or-wrong nationalism” (314): while she rose into the clouds, I fell into the gutter” (315).

The old sheet with a hole in the middle re-appears with its tantalizing lure of lack when Jamila sings behind a white silk veil with a hole cut at the center. Saleem recounts, “That was how the history of our family once again became the fate of a nation.” As Pakistan falls in love with the fifteen year old girl “whom it only ever glimpsed through

a gold-and-white perforated sheet” (313), Saleem also finds himself in love with his sister:

Is it possible to trace the origins of unnatural love? Did Saleem, who had yearned after a place in the centre of history, become besotted with what he saw in his sister of his own hopes for life? Did much-mutilated no-longer-Snotnose, as broken a member of the Midnight Children’s Conference as the knife-scarred beggar-girl Sundari, fall in love with the new wholeness of his sibling? Once the Mubarak, the Blessed One, did I adore in my sister the fulfillment of my most private dreams? (316)

Saleem questions whether his unnatural love could be derived from his longing to be “whole” by being unified with the nation.¹⁶⁵ With the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, each part becomes an external form of the lack inherent in the national self and something projected as a missing part to be reclaimed to cover the fissure between the idea and reality of a nation. As Kane puts it, “Jamila, as Pakistan, becomes the missing and inaccessible part that Saleem, as India, incestuously desires to repossess.”¹⁶⁶

Writing his own version of history through memory, Saleem likens himself to Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*; “I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to

¹⁶⁵ Rama Lohani-Chase examines Rushdie’s ironic use of the metaphor of hole/whole and suggests he plays with the idea of reaching the “whole” through the “hole.” Rama Lohani-Chase. “Political (W)holes: Post-Colonial Identity, Contingency of Meaning and History in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.” *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* 4.10 (2009): 41.

¹⁶⁶ Kane. 111.

end up meaning – yes, meaning – something” (9). A storyteller, Saleem sets up the experience of twentieth-century India against a mythical view of history, which projects a huge time span beyond ordinary human perception or historical categories;

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15th, 1947 – but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga – the losing throw in our national dice-game; the worst of everything; the age when property gives a man rank, when wealth is equated with virtue, when passion becomes the sole bond between men and women, when falsehood brings success (is it any wonder, in such a time, that I too have been confused about good and evil?) ... began on Friday, February 18th, 3102 B.C.; and will last a mere 432,000 years! Already feeling somewhat dwarfed, I should add nevertheless that the Age of Darkness is only the fourth phase of the present Maha-Yuga cycle which is, in total, ten times as long; and when you consider that it takes a thousand Maha-Yugas to make just one Day of Brahma, you’ll see what I mean about proportion. (194)

Saleem invokes the mythic sweep of time as a different time reference for envisioning the modern age and thus challenges the progressive ideas of history as the only version of reality. Parameswaran finds similarity between Rushdie and other magical realist writers such as Garcia Marquez and Gunter Grass in terms of “this quality of mythic sweep that dislodges history from chronometric time in order to abstract its essential

meaning.”¹⁶⁷ With Rushdie’s self-conscious use of the dual heritage, however, the idea of the “essential” meaning of history itself is problematized in the novel. As Kane points out, Rushdie rather embeds historical “facts” in “an ontology drawn from Indian myths, legends, and spiritual philosophies” to put into question the terms of both literary realism and conventional history that define what is considered “real.”¹⁶⁸

Saleem meditates on “what’s true,” which is not necessarily the same with “what’s real,” by poring over the picture that has been hung in his bedroom next to the letter from Nehru. In the picture, two Elizabethan boys are sitting and listening to an old sailor with his finger pointing beyond the sea to the horizon. Captured in the picture is the moment when the old sailor led the young Raleigh to conceive “the dream of making history” by going out in search of El Dorado, a voyage he will later record in a book.¹⁶⁹ It is a moment of the English boy projecting himself as a modern subject of history in a spatial order with homogeneous and absolute qualities. Saleem recalls a birthday party in which his mother dressed him, “a child with a gargantuan nose,” just like the boy in the picture. He imagines himself sitting beside Walter Raleigh and thinks that what lies beyond the horizon is his future then back to the setting of the picture, he sees the finger pointing towards another frame on the wall, “in which my inescapable destiny hung” (122), with a baby picture and the letter from the prime minister. By depicting an Indian boy in Elizabethan costume through Saleem’s recall of a memory, Rushdie intends the “irony of colonial mimicry.” However, it is not simply to expose “the mimics’ distance

¹⁶⁷ Uma Parameswaran. “Handcuffed to History: Salman Rushdie’s Art.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 14.4 (1983): 38.

¹⁶⁸ Kane. 99.

¹⁶⁹ Neil ten Kortenaar. “Postcolonial Ekphrasis: Salman Rushdie Gives the Finger Back to the Empire.” *Contemporary Literature*. 38.2 (1997): 233.

from the imperialist original and of their continuing colonial status.”¹⁷⁰ Rushdie re-politicizes the modern conception of homogeneous time and space projected in the picture by inserting the colonial history and liberation of the subcontinent through Saleem’s imaginary projection of himself into the picture.

Saleem goes on to place the pointing finger in the history of Bombay and detect the forgotten historical layer of the city in its contemporary space: it leads one “out through the window, down the two-storey hillock, across Warden Road, beyond Breach Candy Pools, and out to another sea which was not the sea in the picture; a sea on which the sails of Koli dhows glowed scarlet in the setting sun.” Koli fishermen, “the city’s dispossessed,” who were there as the first inhabitants of Bombay before an East India Company Officer named Methwold came to build a British Bombay. The “accusing finger” points at “us” (123), Saleem suggests, the generation of midnight’s children living in the “here and now” oblivious of the city’s layered history of dispossession:

In the new city, a race of pink conquerors had built palaces in pink stone; but the houses in the narrow lanes of the old city leaned over, jostled, shuffled, blocked each other’s view of the roseate edifices of power. Not that anyone ever looked in that direction, anyway. In the Muslim muhallas or neighborhoods which clustered around Chandni Chowk, people were content to look inwards into the screened-off courtyards of their lives; to roll chick-blinds down over their windows and verandahs. (69)

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 236.

Saleem also links the sailor in the picture to Tai, a folkloric local boatman known for his “magical talk, words pouring from him like fools’ money, past his two gold teeth, laced with hiccups and brandy, soaring up to the most remote Himalayas of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail” (15), who thus represents the lore of storytelling:

‘What’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same.’ True, for me, was from my earliest days something hidden inside the stories Mary Pereira told me...

True was a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman’s finger pointed in the picture on my wall, while the young Raleigh listened to his tales. Now, writing this in my Anglepoised pool of light, I measure truth against those early things: Is this how Mary would have told it? I ask. Is this what that fisherman would have said? (79)

The image of the young Raleigh and the fisherman in the picture overlaps with that of Saleem’s grandfather Aadam and Tai. The boatman and storyteller Tai, “the living antithesis of Oskar-Ilse-Ingrid’s belief in the inevitability of change” (15), stands on the side of tradition and the local community against progress and “Abroad” as represented by Aadam’s bag from Heidelberg, “the alien thing, the invader, progress” (21). With Saleem’s emphasis on ambiguity, then, is Rushdie suggesting that the true lies in the middle ground between Tai’s tradition and Aadam’s progress? How can we read

Saleem's way of measuring truth in relation to the novel's questioning of postcolonial modernity?

The novel's use of old myths is not a nostalgic gesture to revive what has been made ineffective in the modern age in the name of tradition against modern progress. It is not designed to "redefine Hinduism and infuse it with new meaning, so that India's past, its myths and its history, could provide an element of continuity in the search for a national identity."¹⁷¹ Saleem's attitude toward old myths and legends is ambivalent; he describes "a sort of supernatural invasion" of the past as follows:

I remain, today, half-convinced that in that time of accelerated events and diseased hours the past of India rose up to confound her present; the new-born, secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant...so that people were seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices, and the body politic began to crack. (245)

Old fabulism invades India when people go back to their old ways losing their hope for a future with more freedom at the birth of the new myth of the modern-state, "a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will" (112).

¹⁷¹ Brennan.101.

The strain of old fabulism in the novel is sometimes used to show the preposterous nature of what happens in postcolonial cities full of “mirages and lies” (334). Saleem’s cousin Zafar, who wets his pants throughout his adult life and is forced to enter the army to prove he is not a woman, is posted to the Rann of Kutch, ‘disputed territory’ on the border between India and Pakistan, and collapses blubbing when he sees ghosts at a border post. When the ghosts turn out to be smugglers operating under his own father General Zulfikar, Zafar returns on leave, “bearing on his shoulders not only the memory of a thousand childhood humiliations and blows; not only the shame of his lifelong enuresis; but also the knowledge that his own father had been responsible for what-happened-at-the-Rann” (336-7), to slit his father’s throat with a smuggler’s knife. However, the truth becomes a “ghostly, uncertain thing” when newspaper reports only tell people “what is instructed to be.”

I have been only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts; and that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence – that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disorientated, amid an equally infinite number of falseness, unrealities and lies. (326)

Saleem thus makes a distinction between “alternative realities” he had in his Indian childhood and “unrealities and lies” in his Pakistani adolescence.

As discussed above, the Widow and Saleem are competitors in their claim for centrality as metaphorists. The semiotics of old myths is far from uniform with one deity conjoining different aspects and forms of the divine. During the Emergency, Saleem recounts, the Widow shows two sides: “a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us” (421). Perceived as the “Mother of the Nation” (420), she aspires to be “Devi, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods, a multi-limbed divinity with a centre-parting and schizophrenic hair” (438). The Widow uses the public’s perception of her as embodying the Mother Goddess in its diverse aspects to obstruct any opposition. As David Price puts it, Saleem criticizes “a modern form of governmental manipulation of the cultural and political semiotic that produces objective ‘truth.’”¹⁷²

If the Widow’s slogan epitomizes her authoritarian vision of nationhood, “centralized, homogeneous, dominated by a single individual, a single party, a single ethnicity,”¹⁷³ Saleem holds that his narrative has an Indian “urge to encapsulate the whole of reality” (75): “I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone

¹⁷² David W. Price. “Salman Rushdie’s Use and Abuse of History in *Midnight’s Children*.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 25.2 (1994): 101.

¹⁷³ Hogan. 512.

which would not have happened if I had not come... I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world." (383). While recognizing the heterogeneity and multiplicity of his self, Saleem insists on its unity through the homogeneity of the body:

‘O eternal opposition of inside and outside! Because a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everywhichthing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another the next. The body, on the other hand, is homogeneous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will. It is important to preserve this wholeness. (236-7)

What happens to Saleem's body, however, belies Saleem's belief in this idea of homogeneous body: Saleem's hair is pulled out by his teacher Mr. Zagallo when he taunts Saleem for cutting in to save a classmate and uses his face to teach 'human geography.' Although Saleem holds on to the organic idea of the body as indivisible, the episode reveals that it is subject to a system of cultural signification and interpretation.

Aruna Srivastava applies Foucault's idea of genealogy as an analysis of descent to the novel whose protagonist "suffers history through his body."¹⁷⁴ Foucault argues that the task of genealogy, "situated within the articulation of the body and history," is "to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of

¹⁷⁴ Srivastava. 69.

the body.”¹⁷⁵ Saleem’s permanently bowed legs, deafened left ear, and other physical deformities literally illustrate a body imprinted and destroyed by history. As Jean Kane suggests, Rushdie’s representation of the national body as fragmented undermines “not only the colonialist paradigm of the silent, atemporal, and natural primitive, but also the nationalist conception of the new country as an essential totality.”¹⁷⁶

The picture of the world recreated through Saleem’s reminiscences is far from an essential totality. A historicist understanding of contemporaneity is that things from different historical periods can exist simultaneously but belong to different worlds. The supernatural is something “from the past surviving” in a “disenchanted present.” A double gesture of inclusion and exclusion is implicit in the word ‘contemporary,’ as the things residual from the past are considered to pass away in the forward movement of historical time.¹⁷⁷ In *Waterland*, Tom Crick explores the limits of history by showing how the world of “old swamps of myth” intrudes on the local narrative of progress. Saleem mixes up the fabulous and supernatural with the factual in the novel to explore alternate realities put aside in official history writing.

Rushdie depicts the “whole disjointed unreality of the times” (76) through the phantasmagoric episode at the Red Fort, “that blackened ruin” (80), in Delhi. Saleem’s mother-to-be Amina Sinai, on her way to see a fortuneteller in the Red Fort, encounters things you cannot see with “city eyes” and people who lead invisible lives, not recorded in official history: the men with elephantiasis of the balls and the beggars in boxcars,

¹⁷⁵ Foucault. 83.

¹⁷⁶ Kane. 95.

¹⁷⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty. “The Time of History and the Times of the Gods.” *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 54.

children with black teeth, girl children baring their nipples, sweeper women with collapsed spines and bunches of twigs, untouchables, and cripples – “a power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength” (81). Her husband Ahmed Sinai is also there to deposit money at an old fort to pay off a radical anti-Muslim organization named Ravana. Monkeys at the fort tear away the bag, and the enraged Ravana gang will burn down Ahmed’s warehouse. What makes this phantasmagoric scene more amazing is Amina’s encounter with a white woman beggar who walked from Calcutta out of shame for the Killing; “Did you hear about the European?” the white woman asks, “... Yes, among the killers, Begum Sahiba, walking through the town at night with blood on his shirt, a white man deranged by the coming futility of his kind” (82).

Fredric Jameson introduces what he calls postmodern “fantastic historiography” to explain what characterizes fabulous genealogical chronicles or novels where imaginary people and events mix up with real historical ones. The fantastic historiography suggests a new way of thinking and perceiving by juxtaposing disparate materials that belong to different registers in traditional historical knowledge. Whereas the older aesthetic mode unifies a discontinuous variety of images and objects into a centered organic sequence, the new mode of perception combines generic incompatibilities without a gesture of resolution: it creates “a kind of incommensurability-vision that does not pull the eyes back into focus but provisionally entertains the tension of their multiple coordinates.”¹⁷⁸ Mixing the fabulous with the

¹⁷⁸ Jameson. 372.

factual to describe alternative possibilities represented by midnight's children, Saleem challenges the reader by leaving the question of interpretation open:

Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real...Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view: they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished. (200)

This incommensurability-vision is similar to what Saleem seeks in his argument for the dimension of ambiguity. Saleem meditates on dualistic thinking in the children's board game of Snakes and Ladders:

All games have morals; and the game of Snakes and Ladders captures, as no other activity can hope to do, the eternal truth that for every ladder you climb, a snake is waiting just around the corner; and for every snake, a ladder will compensate. But it's more than that; no mere carrot-and-stick affair; because implicit in the game is the unchanging twoness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil; the solid rationality of ladders balances the occult sinuosities of the serpent; in the opposition of staircase and cobra we can see, metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions, Alpha against Omega, father

against mother; here is the war of Mary and Musa, and the polarities of knees and nose. (141)

As mentioned above, the novel lays out dualistic pairs, including Saleem and Shiva, but a tone of uncertainty undermines it. Rushdie constructs and deconstructs oppositions “by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent.”¹⁷⁹ Saleem adds, “but I found, very early in my life, that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity.”

Saleem’s nostalgic act of retrospection is marked by a sense of “alienness” that comes from the twilight status of memory. In “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie addresses it in relation to the sense of cultural displacement he has to shoulder as an Indian writer in England. He writes on the sense of loss displaced writers have and on how *Midnight’s Children* started from his desire to restore the past after his visit to Bombay. The nostalgic desire to reclaim “the thing that was lost” then gives way to a critical awareness of the fissure that opens up between what has been lost and its representation through memory: “our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ M. Keith Booker. “Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie.” *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*. Ed. D. M. Fletcher. Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994. 238.

¹⁸⁰ Rushdie. 10.

In Saleem's narrative, the fissure appears in the form of an unresolved tension between "young-Saleem-then" (167), who does not know where his purpose lies, and the narrator-Saleem-now, drained of any hope and overshadowed by his fate, what has been done to him. Rushdie literalizes Saleem's crisis as a subject by implying that his body is falling apart. In his autobiographical effort to reconstitute himself, Saleem is engaged in the act of re-membering. In recounting his Pakistan days, Saleem even addresses the "young-Saleem-then" in the third person as a sign of deepening gap. He meditates on the fear of schizophrenia that lies in every Pakistani:

I suggest that at the deep foundations of their unease lay the fear of schizophrenia, of splitting, that was buried like an umbilical cord in every Pakistani heart. In those days, the country's East and West Wings were separated by the unbridgeable land-mass of India; but past and present, too, are divided by an unbridgeable gulf. Religion was the glue of Pakistan, holding the halves together; just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality holding together our then and our now. (351)

When Saleem mentions an "umbilical cord," it reminds the reader of the split inherent in his identity due to the baby swap. Thus, his emphasis on "consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time," sounds ironical and at the same time poignant as Saleem appears here with a new nickname, "the buddha," which refers to an

‘old man’ and “one who – like the prince who found enlightenment under the Bo tree – has withdrawn in spirit from the world of pain and sorrow.”¹⁸¹

At the breakout of the India-Pakistan War of 1965, when “the voice of Jamila Singer sang Pakistani troops to their deaths” (339), all Saleem’s family are killed by bombs, and Saleem, struck by a flying spittoon, loses his memory: “emptied of history, the buddha learned the arts of submission, and did only what was required of him” (350). After his sister puts him into the army, Saleem serves as a man-dog with his extraordinary olfactory power in the CUTIA, ‘Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities’: as one of the boy soldiers in his unit explains, Saleem, with “no memory, not interested in people, lives like a dog!” (349). One of the military operations in which Saleem participated is lead his team to arrest Sheikh Mujib, the leader of the Bangladeshi independence movement, on March 15, 1971, when they see the Pakistani troops killing, raping, and pillaging the town while driving through the streets. Saleem embarks a dream-journey in the “historyless anonymity” (360) of the Sundarbans, into which he enters after killing a peasant who looks like “Father Time enraged” (359). The Sundarbans, located on the border between India and Bangladeshi, is described in a phantasmagoric, dreamlike vision as a place he is reinitiated into a new adulthood through encounters with ghosts of the past after the time of punishment:

This, however, also helped to restore in him the sense of responsibility which the just-following-orders requirements of war had sapped; so it seemed that the

¹⁸¹ Rege. 350.

magical jungle, having tormented them with their misdeeds, was leading them by the hand towards a new adulthood. And flitting through the night-forest went the wraiths of their hopes; these, however, they were unable to see clearly, or to grasp. (364)

Rushdie explains that he performs a descent into hell in the Sundarban part of *Midnight's Children* as an epic.¹⁸² The timelessness of Saleem's dream journey in the Sundarbans, a place where old myths survive as archetypes of human experience and desire in story forms and dream forms, is linked with the timelessness of the stories of Tai, "the repository of 'racial memory.'"¹⁸³ The dream-forest as a non-place, a place outside of history, or a place of otherness fits into what Foucault terms heterotopias or other spaces: sites described as juxtaposing incompatible spaces in a single real place, entering the quasi-eternal in slices of time that break from traditional time, or having a system of opening and closing. Bitten and paralyzed by a snake venom, Saleem sees the world "in mirror-image, with the right side on the left" (364) and then is jolted back into unity; Saleem reclaims his past, "everything, all of it, all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man" (365). The place of otherness thus functions as "a space of illusion" that exposes every real space as illusory.¹⁸⁴

Using a cinema screen as a metaphor for the human perception of reality, Saleem maintains that "reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the

¹⁸² Salman Rushdie and Michael Reder. *Conversations with Salman Rushdie edited by Michael Reder*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000. 37.

¹⁸³ Parameswaran. 38.

¹⁸⁴ Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 16.1 (1986): 27.

more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible” (165); when we are too close to the screen, we see grain instead of the stars’ faces and realize that “the illusion itself *is* reality” (166).

Saleem’s point here is not simply that what we call reality is just an illusion. In “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie addresses the perspective he gains from the sense of cultural displacement that he experiences as an expatriate writer: the loss of the past is “made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere.’”¹⁸⁵

Discussing the Lacanian sense of the Real, Slavoj Žižek suggests, “when we awaken into reality after a dream, we usually say to ourselves ‘it was just a dream’, thereby blinding ourselves to the fact that in our everyday, wakening reality we are *nothing but a consciousness of this dream*.” (47) In his approach to the process of rewriting history in terms of “a symbolization, a symbolic integration of meaningless imaginary traces,” Žižek argues that the meaning of the past real is not given or discovered, but constructed retroactively: “every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.” (56)

Postmodernist historical novels are more concerned with questioning the idea of progress to retrace stories of others repressed in official accounts of modern history than with rewriting the past with a new master-signifier. Rushdie writes on the fragmentary nature of memory as remains: “The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater

¹⁸⁵ Rushdie. 12.

resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities” (12). Before telling the climactic story of what happened when he was a captive in the Widows’ Hostel, Saleem meditates on the fragmentation of his memory:

Scraps of memory: this is not how a climax should be written. A climax should surge towards its Himalayan peak; but I am left with shreds, and must jerk towards my crisis like a puppet with broken strings. This is not what I had planned; but perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin. (Once, in a blue room, Ahmed Sinai improvised endings for fairy-tales whose original conclusions he had long ago forgotten; the Brass Monkey and I heard, down the years, all kinds of different versions of the journey of Sinbad, and of the adventures of Hatim Tai...if I began again, would I, too, end in a different place?) Well then: I must content myself with shreds and scraps: as I wrote centuries ago, the trick is to fill in the gaps, guided by the few clues one is given. (427)

While apparently complaining about the fragmentary nature of memory, Saleem makes an implicit suggestion that it is the very partiality of what is remembered that invites storytellers to tell their own different versions of the story.

Saleem's narrative often uses the device of foreshadowing to give "periodic previews of events to come."¹⁸⁶ In retrospection, Saleem shows a double awareness of possibilities and restrictions of possibility in retelling the past: "a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before" are reduced to "a thousand and one dead ends" (200). With a sense of fatalism, he even speculates, "the purpose of the five hundred and eighty-one lay in their destruction; that they had come, in order to come to nothing" (304). "Unless, of course, there's no such thing as chance," Saleem reflects on optimism,

We should either optimistically – get up and cheer, because if everything is planned in advance, then we all have a meaning, and are spared the terror of knowing ourselves to be random, without a why; or else, of course, we might – as pessimists – give up right here and now, understanding the futility of thought decision action, since nothing we think makes any difference anyway; things will be as they will. Where, then, is optimism? In fate or in chaos? (78-9)

The historical novel experiments with the limit between "historicization of fiction" and "fictionalization of history"; in combining the probable with the actual through historical imagination, it explores the historical probable, what might have been, through the fictional space of possibility, which is tested against the "real" events, what has been. Fiction liberates "possibilities buried in the actual past" and at the same time is

¹⁸⁶ Parameswaran. 38.

restricted by the necessity of what has happened. Historical imagination plays with the space in-between the law of historical necessity and the loose threads of chance uncaught by the net of necessity. The novel's use of magical realism or the "time of gods" challenges the limits of historical imagination by putting together what belongs to different registers to question our conception of what is real.

To those critical of the novel's "allegedly despairing tone," Rushdie replies that new stories teeming in the narrative are "the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy."¹⁸⁷ Saleem's reminiscences counteract the oppressive sense of fate in Saleem's familial history by presenting different perspectives. Saleem, immersed in obsessive despair and bitter refusal of anything new, is scolded by Durga, a washer woman who is described as representing "novelty, beginnings, the advent of new stories events complexities" (445): "You should understand that when a man loses interest in new matters, he is opening the door for the Black Angel" (453). Saleem's approach to history is genealogical in the sense that he is telling stories of those who have been forgotten or lost in the singular story of progress. The recounted stories of multiple and heterogeneous lives form a constellation of alternate possibilities for a future:

As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form – or perhaps

¹⁸⁷ Rushdie. 16.

simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. (300)

Saleem's description of the Indian people's national longing for form is similar to what Benjamin explains as a conception of history different from the positivistic understanding of the past: the historical approach means "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."¹⁸⁸

Saleem's quest for the disregarded dimension of ambiguity turns his past into a time and space full of possibilities for creative investment. For all the historically and biologically given matters in which he had no choice, he invents new parents for himself in retelling his past and, like an artist, creates a world out of "the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift" (174); "giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents – a form of reverse fertility" (243).

The act of retrospection, of recollecting time, enables us to clearly see the multiple unchosen alternatives in their full value. With the "deep perspective" achieved by hindsight, the random contingencies of the moment can become alternative paths to the present or a future. It is through his sense of what has been done to India that Saleem can view Mian Abdullah the Hummingbird, founder and leader of the Free Islam Convocation who opposed the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947 and was assassinated, and Picture Singh, leader of the magician's ghetto and a socialist, as true but lost

¹⁸⁸ Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." 255.

possibilities for India's future, "the path that was not pursued,"¹⁸⁹ at the crucial moments of Indian history.

Saleem compares his writing to the process of pickling his past, "the chutneyfication of history" (459); in his struggle against the imminent end, he is giving immortality to his memories by pickling his thirty years' lives in thirty jars of special blends "waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (460). The sense of crisis in the novel is also public, as in the Thatcherite England in *Waterland*: the urgency to recount stories of the past comes from Saleem's concern about the new amnesiac generation, which is strikingly represented in the episode of the "Midnite Confidential Club," a parody of the Midnight Children's Conference. A club for "the city's sophisticated, cosmopolitan youth" (453), it is a "place outside time," whose "negation of history" illustrates a postmodern world immersed in "here and now": a female attendant explains, "Here you are in a world without faces or names; here people have no memories, families or past; here is for *now*, for nothing except right now" (454).

Saleem is writing his story for his son Aadam Sinai, a member of a second generation of magical children, who is Shiva's son in another ironical twist of fate. His birth repeats Saleem's by being "mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly chained to those of his country" (420), but this repetition occurs with difference:

¹⁸⁹ Price. 103.

We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he, Emergency-born, will be is already more cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist. Already, he is stronger, harder, more resolute than I: when he sleeps, his eyeballs are immobile beneath their lids. Aadam Sinai, child of knees-and-nose does not (as far as I can tell) surrender to dreams.

(425)

This second generation, already more cautious and biding their time, will have a different kind of struggle at the new stage of post-Independence India with new possibilities and restrictions of the possibility born at the time of Emergency.

At the ending, Saleem imagines his anticipated death in which he meets all those who appeared in his story, while his body is falling off into pieces. His imaginary projection of a future turns into a vision of the future of the thousand and first generations “to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes” (463). It is a moment in which the re-presence of the past and the anticipation of a future meet through Saleem’s act of telling his own version of history. Saleem leaves a jar empty because the future cannot be preserved. The jar will be for his son and other storytellers who will continue to fill in the gaps left with their version of stories.

CHAPTER IV

A JOURNEY INTO "A LAND OF LOOKING-GLASS EVENTS":

GEOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, a novel of memory like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, weaves fragmentary pieces of the past as filtered through personal memory to trace a genealogy of interconnections between families across borders. Ghosh wrote in a correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty:

Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines*, and my most recent *The Glass Palace*) are centred on families. I know that for myself this is a way of displacing the "nation" – I am sure that this is the case also with many Indian writers other than myself. In other words, I'd like to suggest that writing about families is one way of *not* writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities).¹⁹⁰

In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai's autobiographical project of rewriting his personal and familial history is a way of writing about the nation and at the same time "not" writing about the nation. Saleem's personal story provides an allegory for national history, but Rushdie challenges the linear narrative of the nation as a homogeneous entity with "multiple alternatives" to one official version of national history through the "webs of genealogies" Saleem weaves through reminiscence. The

¹⁹⁰ Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty. "A Correspondence on Provincializing Europe." *Radical History Review*. 83 (2002): 147.

family memoir in *The Shadow Lines* traverses different temporal and spatial points, Calcutta and London of 1939, Calcutta in the 1950s and 60s and Dhaka in the 1970s, and London in 1981, as the relationship between two families across borders spans three generations from colonial days, in which Lionel Tresawsen, inventor and industrialist, made friends with Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chaudhuri at a séance, to the late twentieth century when the narrator, great-great-nephew of the judge, visits Mrs. Price, Tresawsen's daughter, during his research trip. Writing about the boundary of the nation rather than about the nation, the novel examines the traces of the past left on the present-time in people's lives through historical ties between families in independent India and in England and Bangladesh.

The nameless narrator of the novel, who sets out retelling stories of the familial past through the filter of his memory, is engaged with an archaeological act of uncovering layers of silences around traumatic sites in personal and national history. The novel is the narrator's "struggle with silence" (213) to write about a series of events of 1964 that lead to the death of Tridib, the narrator's uncle, in an incident of mob violence in Dhaka when the narrator is a young schoolboy. The riots and his uncle's death have been buried and forgotten in silence until the narrator, now a PhD student, recalls them when attending a lecture on the India-China War of 1962. He realizes that there is an odd gap in public memory about the riots in Calcutta while he and his friends have a rush of recollections about the war: the silence of the riots is in contrast with the "eloquence of war" in the library with sections filled with "whole shelves of books on the war – histories, political analyses, memoirs, tracts – weighty testimony" (217). On his

continued search, the narrator finds, to his surprise, that there were riots in Khulna, East Pakistan, across the border from Calcutta about the same time: “It was thus, sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library,” the narrator recounts, “that I began my strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events” (219).

The silence, however, is not simply a matter of faulty memory or of omissions in official history. The narrator explains how the silence is only defined by what it is not:

It is not, for example, the silence of an imperfect memory. Nor is it a silence enforced by a ruthless state – nothing like that: no barbed wire, no check-points to tell me where its boundaries lie. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words – that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words. (213)

The silence is not something imposed by an external force like a state, but what marks the limits of one’s subjectivity as the silence is what “lies outside the reach of my intelligence.” The narrator’s struggle with silence thus will be an attempt to delve into the tension between the real and discourse, since “when we try to speak of events of which we do not know the meaning, we must lose ourselves in the silence that lies in the gap between words and the world” (214).

The silence is also something that marks the rational limits of a culture. On his search for newspaper reports on the riots, the narrator notes the things headlined on the newspaper in the name of what is happening “now”: “There is something in its urgent contemporaneity – the weather reports, the lists of that day’s engagements in the city, the advertisements of half-remembered films, still crying out in bold print as though it were all happening now, today” (222). In contrast to the eloquence of those things called ‘politics,’ whose significance is discussed over and over in the realm of public discourse, the narrator speculates on the silence of “these other things”:

But for these other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness. (223)

Diverse happenings are assorted and reported for their currency, but those “unnameable” things for which only words of description can be used when they happen will disappear into oblivion because they fall out of the symbolic system of a culture into gaps that form the limits of narrativization.

The narrator’s archaeological imagination based on the stories told by Tridib suggests a different conception of historical time and space by interweaving different temporal and spatial points. Shuttling back and forth between and among those points, Ghosh’s narrative of memory not only destabilizes the process of narrativizing national

identity through a linear, coherent and continuous trajectory, but also merges peoples, places and boundaries to show temporal and spatial interconnections: Calcutta and London in 1939, connected when Tridib's family visits London, and the London of 1939 and 1981, overlaid through the narrator's recollections of stories Trid told him during his research trip to London. With this technique of overlaying, the text seeks to rewrite the "empty, homogeneous time" in the realist writing of the nation.¹⁹¹ Such an overlaying of different times and spaces interconnected through reminiscences challenges the kind of urgent contemporaneity delivered through newspaper headlines in the name of what is happening "now, today." This narrative movement across time and space provides the reader with different possibilities for signification in retracing the various interwoven narrative threads.¹⁹²

This section examines how the narrator's struggle with silence in official history leads to a retelling of his familial past as a story of borders and a rethinking of the modern conception of historical time and space. I suggest that the narrator examines colonial legacies and nationalist ideals through stories of characters and events like mirror images in the process of creating a national imaginary through his journey into a land of looking-glass events.

Ghosh's archaeological work in the novel, with its concern with gaps and silences, can be described in terms of the dynamics of historiography redefined by Certeau as "a work on the margins." Certeau's heterological perspective calls attention

¹⁹¹ Sharmani Patricia Gabriel. "The Heteroglossia of Home: Re-'Routing' the Boundaries of National Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41.1 (2005): 50.

¹⁹² Nagesh Rao. "Cosmopolitanism, Class and Gender in *The Shadow Lines*." *South Asian Review* 24.1 (2003): 104.

to the tension between the real and discourse to see discursivity in its relation to an eliminated other, “the unspoken element implied by the closure of the discourse.”¹⁹³ The novel retraces the shadow lines of history and geography through the narrator’s reminiscences to inspect the silenced in national history through gaps in its narrative.

Zizek approaches the historiographical process in terms of “a symbolization, a symbolic integration of meaningless imaginary traces,” to show that the meaning of the unspoken traced in a historical narrative is always constituted retrospectively: “The past exists as it is included, as it enters (into) the synchronous net of the signifier – that is, as it is symbolized in the texture of the historical memory – and that is why we are all the time ‘rewriting history,’ retroactively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures.”¹⁹⁴ While interweaving stories of different temporal and spatial points retrospectively, Ghosh’s novel is also engaged with unweaving the “synchronous net of the signifier” by disrupting the clear boundary of national identity. As Sharmani Gabriel puts it, the main impetus is “to disturb the stable boundaries of nationalist discourse and the epistemological conception of cultures as fixed and homogeneous systems.”¹⁹⁵

In *Shadow Lines*, the narrator attempts to work through the traumatic memory of Tridib’s death in Dhaka through “a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma.”¹⁹⁶ As such, it requires imaginative

¹⁹³ De Certeau. 40.

¹⁹⁴ Žižek. 55-6.

¹⁹⁵ Sharmani Patricia Gabriel. “The Heteroglossia of Home: Re-‘Routing’ the Boundaries of National Identity in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41.1 (2005): 41.

¹⁹⁶ Suvir Kaul. “Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*.” *Oxford Literary Review* 16.1-2 (1994): 126.

investment as a way to invent one's own version of story. The narrator has an "uncanny ability to remember and imagine."¹⁹⁷ It is the archaeological Tridib, "an expert on ruins" (141) as a PhD student in archaeology, who led the narrator to learn how to reconstruct lives from the remains of the past: "the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision" (24). With this emphasis on 'imagination,' the narrator is cautious to stress that Tridib was not interested in fairyland. At a pub during his visit to London, the narrator tells Ila and Robi, Tridib's cousins, about the archeological Tridib:

The Tridib who was much more contemptuous of fairylands than she would ever be; the Tridib who had pushed me to imagine the roofs of Colombo for myself, the Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. And then, because she shrugged dismissively and said: Why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is? I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness – it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions. (31)

The novel's archeological imagination is not a nostalgic desire to make the past an ideal time, nor is it an ability to conjure up the past as it was. What it highlights instead is the discursive nature of our perception: "we could not see without inventing what we saw."

¹⁹⁷ Shameem Black. "Cosmopolitanism at Home: Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.3 (2006): 57.

The narrator's quest for the forgotten memories of the riots is then his effort to "do it properly."

The Shadow Lines has no listener as a character for the narrator's story as in Swift's *Waterland* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. However, the novel employs elements of storytelling through the narrator's relationship with Tridib. Storytelling and memory provide a way of filling in gaps in the written documentation in the novel to record stories and voices silenced in official narratives of history. Recollecting events in private memory calls attention to the discursive nature of the nationalist narrative of history by exposing its selective amnesia. Ghosh finds in personal reminiscence and storytelling "a way of recapturing the foreclosures and absences of written records."¹⁹⁸ However, it is not simply to complement the modern form of historical narrative with the premodern oral discourse of storytelling that Ghosh incorporates the elements of storytelling. Anjali Roy argues that the novel retells stories of the past "to retrieve those counter-narratives occluded or appropriated by official bourgeois nationalisms through the circumscribed but close-up perspective of *microhistory*, which tends to focus on the local rather than the national."¹⁹⁹ With its attempt to write about the boundary of the nation and explore the limits of narrativization, however, the novel rather disrupts the simple opposition of the local and the national or of microhistory and the grand narrative of national history.

¹⁹⁸ Anjali Roy. "Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's 'Little Stories' in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *ibid.* 35.2 (2000): 42-3.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 41.

Unlike Tom Crick and Saleem Sinai, the narrator in the novel is given no name. Ghosh makes this anonymous narrator a reflector through which we can see other characters, while his identity itself is constituted through his interactions with other characters in his story. Meenakshi Mukherjee sees the narrator's consciousness as a transparent and porous space which "lets different persons, events, places luminously enter his story, and find new configurations there."²⁰⁰ The novel is concerned with how a personal and cultural identity is constituted through mirror images, that is, through the self's relatedness to the other. The novel presents characters as perceived by each other, and their perception of each other, how they see each other, often tells more about themselves, their values, social status and positions than about the other.

Tridib is a figure with "travelled eyes" like Aadam Aziz in *Midnight's Children*: "even at those times, when he was the centre of everybody's attention, there was always something a little detached about his manner" (9). Tridib, "the son of a diplomat, scion of a rich and powerful family" (10), lives at his family's old house in Calcutta with his grandmother while his family lives most of the time away from home. At the street-corner addas, informal conversations, around Gole Park, he mingles with a "floating, talkative population of students and would-be footballers and bank clerks and small-time politicians" (8). Versed in all kinds of subjects, including architecture, music, zoology, and literature, he has "a streak of intensely worldly shrewdness" and at the same time shows "a casual self-mockery about many of the things he said which left his listeners uncertain about whether they ought to take what he said at face value or believe its opposite." As

²⁰⁰ Mukherjee Meenakshi. "Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*." *The Shadow Lines*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995. 260.

the narrator comments, there is “something just a little improbable” (10) in a man of his class and status turning up at those street corners to mingle with folks for years.

To Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother who represents the middle-class nationalist consciousness with her belief in the “unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power” (77), Tridib is irresponsible, “an essentially lightweight and frivolous character,” who is “determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence” (6). With her emphasis on discipline, she holds on to the stable and coherent order available in the domestic sphere. Gole Park at the street corners where Tridib joins addas is a place shunned by the narrator's grandmother Tha'mma: “She had a deep horror of the young men who spent their time at the street-corner addas and tea-stalls around there. All fail-cases, she would sniff; think of their poor mothers, flung out on dung-heaps, starving...” (7).

For the older generation, the national identity of India was formed through liberation struggles. She believes national belonging is earned with blood one's family shed to draw the nation's borders through wars. When the narrator tells her the story Ila told him of what happened to her, an Indian girl at a school in London, Tha'mma says,

She doesn't belong there. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died

in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? (76)

An “exemplar of militant nationalism,”²⁰¹ Tha'mma argues for its antagonistic logic of dividing sides along the borders as what unites a national community divided into religious sects against a common enemy. Her sense of nationhood and her idea for freedom are rooted in her personal experience of anti-imperialism. Brought up on the stories she heard about terrorists who fought for national independence, she wanted to do something for the terrorists. One of her classmates, who had been trained as a member of a secret terrorist society, was arrested during a police raid; she didn't recognize the shy boy “with a wispy little beard” (36) as one since the image of a terrorist she had in her mind was “a huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard.” Recalling him regretfully, she does not hesitate to respond to her grandson's question if she would have worked with him to kill the English magistrate: “I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free” (39).

With her idea of freedom based on anti-colonial struggles, the narrator's grandmother is counter-posed to Ila, a cosmopolitan youth, who lives in the present: “For Ila the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like

²⁰¹ Kaul. 134.

an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates” (30). She illustrates the new amnesiac generation of “the city’s sophisticated, cosmopolitan youth,” which lives immersed in “here and now,” in *Midnight’s Children*. Rushdie’s novel ends with a hint that the new generation will have a different kind of struggle at the new stage of post-Independence India, while Ghosh’s novel intermixes old and new generations through the narrator’s reminiscences to provide a parallax view of each position.

The episode in which Ila insists on dancing at a hotel nightclub against her brother Robi’s objection during her visit to Calcutta shows a clash of cultural values. To Ila, who dares to transgress the invisible line of gender codes inscribed in places, Robi points out: “You can do what you like in England, he said. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That’s our culture; that’s how we live” (87). With his sense of authority that “grew out of that subterranean realm of judgment which we call morality, the condition of whose success is that its rulings be always shrouded from argument” (82), Robi here poses as a figure of patriarchal authority of which Ila desires to be free. On the other hand, the narrator’s grandmother, who dreamed of “killing for her freedom,” finds Ila’s idea of freedom contemptible: “It’s not freedom she wants... She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases; that’s all that any whore would want. She’ll find it easily enough over there; that’s what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free” (87-8).

Roy argues that Ghosh creates “*matria* history” by constructing a matrilineal genealogy grounded in the feminine world of the mother revolving around the family

and the village to challenge “the patriarchal thrust of dynastic histories of rural Bengal.”²⁰² Yet the novel’s archaeological act of retelling stories of the past is not simply concerned with constructing a counter-narrative or an alternative account of the partition based on a fixed category of identity. If Tridib, an in-between figure with his travelled eyes, suggests a self-imagining that falls outside of the traditional categories of class or gender identity, Tha’mma’s is “an untypical femininity.”²⁰³ Widowed to become the family breadwinner, Tha’mma bends the gendered boundaries between private and public domains; as a school teacher, she works in a public space to bring “discipline” and “order,” themes critical to the modern state and civil society, to domestic spaces while she herself is far from the image of the modern Indian housewife whose idealized figure is supported by the image of the goddess Lakshmi, the Hindu god Vishnu’s wife, mobilized as the model of the Hindu wife.²⁰⁴ The narrator, in grief over his grandmother’s death, states: “she had always been too passionate a person to find a real place in my tidy late-bourgeois world, the world that I had inherited, in which examinations were more important than death” (90).

The theme of freedom appears in different episodes with different characters in the novel. Ghosh examines identity in the sense of being “bound”: “I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to

²⁰² Roy. 42.

²⁰³ Ibid. 41, 44.

²⁰⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty. “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?” *Representations*. 37 (1992): 12, 15. Chakrabarty suggests, “The themes of ‘discipline’ and ‘order’ were critical in shaping nationalist imaginings of aesthetics and power. ‘Discipline’ was seen as the key to the power of the colonial (i.e., modern) state, but it required certain procedures for redefining the self.” He also discusses how bourgeois ideas about domesticity and connections between the domestic and the national were modified in the Bengali discourse in a colonial period.

wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound.” The narrator stays happy being bound because he knows he “could not live without the clamour of the voices within” (88) him. In the novel, Ghosh examines identity as “the site of multiple and conflicting claims”²⁰⁵ against the idea of a single uniform personal and national identity. Concerned with conflicting “voices within,” the novel explores the metaphoric boundaries of identity through the relationship between memory and place while retelling national history as a story of borders.

In his struggle with silence, the narrator addresses the national trauma of Partition, whose origin is traced back to the “Hindu/Muslim enmity that was fueled by England’s divide and rule policy.”²⁰⁶ The story of the national division is retold in the novel through the narrator’s quest to uncover the national silence and the repressed familial memory surrounding the riots, an outbreak of internal conflicts that threaten to unsettle the idea of the Indian nation and culture as a uniform entity. They are repressed in public memory because they show the modern nation’s inability to “fully transform ‘people,’ with their local or transnational identifications and communities, into disciplined citizens who identify solely with the protocols of the nation-state.” The narrator points out when he makes connection between the series of events that led to Tridib’s death: “the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of

²⁰⁵ Joan W. Scott. “Experience.” *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 31.

²⁰⁶ Asha Sen. “Crossing Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*.” *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 5.1 (1997): 54.

government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between people” (226). Kaul adds that the meaning of riots in the lexicon of modernity can be found only in “accounts of their suppression.”²⁰⁷

A recurrent figure in the novel is “mirror” or “looking-glass” as the narrator’s struggle with silence leads him into “a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events” (219). Ghosh’s use of mirrors, a figure to disrupt the clear border of identity and difference, serves to create “a spectral contact zone, created by the phantom border of the mirror, indiscriminate but ultimately revealing.”²⁰⁸ The narrator’s journey into “a land of looking-glass events” de-centers national identity by revealing the otherness as part of the self-identity of cities and people across borders.

Territorial borders are supposed to mark out political separation and socio-cultural difference,²⁰⁹ but the narrator is struck by the irony of drawing the borderline:

I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines; I had to remind myself that they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders and dealing with it though science and factories, for that was the pattern of the world. They had drawn their borders, believing in

²⁰⁷ Kaul. 141.

²⁰⁸ Ashcroft. 20.

²⁰⁹ See Meenakshi 266 and Kaul 138.

that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland.
(228)

With the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan as nation-states in the modern form of political organization, violence is moved to the borders as wars fought state-sponsored according to the “pattern of the world” based upon the system of technical rationality. The irony is that the two cities, Dhaka and Calcutta, have never been “more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines.” Using the mirror image as a metaphor, the narrator adds, “Each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free – our looking-glass border” (228).

The epiphanic moment comes to the narrator when he looks at the old Bartholomew’s Atlas, which Tridib used while telling stories to him, and learns the meaning of distance: Tridib’s atlas shows, “within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space” (227), that Chengdu in China and Chian Mai in Thailand are much nearer Calcutta than Delhi or Srinagar is. However, the narrator realizes that no event that might happen in those cities would make the people of Calcutta pour out into the streets but for war: “It seemed to me, then, that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all” (228). The shadow lines point to the geography of imagination as part of the project of modernity, which requires two complementary spaces, the Here and the

Elsewhere, as national identity requires “an alterity, a referent outside of itself.”²¹⁰ On one hand, a nation-state is established in unity as an imagined community through borders which enforce cartographic and political divisions, and on the other hand those invisible lines draw two separate places into the circle of identification, that is, the logic of self and other in the relationship of mirror images for each other.

The novel also examines the shadow-lines that divide and draw to each other between London and Calcutta. In the postcolonial city, the lines are found in the form of the spectral presence of colonial legacies remaining to affect people’s values and behaviors in the independent nation. Ghosh presents the narrator and Ila as mirror images: “when we were children, ...she and I were so alike that I could have been her twin – it was that very Ila who baffled me yet again with the mystery of difference” (31). Ila is idealized for being different: “she seemed to belong to a wholly different species of being from the women my friends and I had visited – more perfect than any human form could possibly be” (109). His desire for Ila is “always couched in terms that emphasizes her ‘Western’ ways”²¹¹: “She looked improbably exotic to me, dressed in faded blue jeans and a T-shirt—like no girl I had ever seen before except in pictures in American magazines” (79).

It is through her that Nick Price, Mrs. Price’s son, becomes an ideal ego for the narrator. When the narrator was playing house with Ila, she told him about Nick, who was three years older than them and bigger and stronger than the narrator:

²¹⁰ Trouillot. 222-25.

²¹¹ Kaul. 129.

After that day Nick Price, whom I had never seen, and would, as far as I knew, never see, became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some ways more desirable – I did not know what, except that it was so in Ila's eyes and therefore true. I would look into the glass and there he would be, growing, always faster, always a head taller than me, with hair on his arms and chest and crotch while mine were still pitifully bare. And yet if I tried to look into the face of that ghostly presence, to see its nose, its teeth, its ears, there was never anything there, it had no features, no form; I would shut my eyes and try to see its face, but all I would see was a shock of yellow hair tumbling over a pair of bright blue eyes. (49)

Ila and the narrator are twins in their desire for the exotic other, Nick Price, as a figure that will fill the lack they have as postcolonial subjects. Thus, the specular presence of the Western other is what ties postcolonial subjects together in the same cycle of identification, as the narrator tells Ila: "You can never be free of me... If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because I am within you...just as you are within me" (87).

If the places are presented as points of enunciation, grounds for one's identity, they are also imbued with a sense of uncertainty as different perceptions and imaginings in the novel disturb the stable identity of a place. The places in the text are reconstructed through storytelling and memory. Location is not a fixed geographical point, but produced with histories as the identity of a place is destabilized and reconstructed

through memory. As Stuart Hall writes, “The homeland is not waiting back there for the new ethnics to rediscover it. There is a past to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and it has to be grasped as a history, as something that has to be told. It is narrated. It is grasped through memory. It is grasped through desire. It is grasped through reconstruction. It is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities.”²¹²

A sense of displacement runs through the novel’s memory of narrative. Archaeological imagination in the novel is figured as an ability to see the past as present, the “contemporaneity of the past.”²¹³ Ghosh re-defines the “past as present” through memory in terms of “ghostliness.” On the last day of his stay in London as a research student in 1981, the narrator visits Mrs. Price’s at Lymington Road and goes down to the cellar led by Ila:

Slowly, as I looked around me, those scattered objects seemed to lose their definition in the harsh, flat light of the naked bulb; one of their dimensions seemed to dissolve: they flattened themselves against the walls; the trunks seemed to be hanging like paintings on the walls. Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of the nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs; the ghost of Snipe in that far corner,

²¹² Stuart Hall. “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity.” *Culture, Globalization, and the World-system: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Ed. Anthony King. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. Requoted from Caren Kaplan. *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 159.

²¹³ Kaul. 134.

near his medicine chest, worrying about his dentures; the ghost of the eight-year-old Ila, sitting with me under that vast table in Raibajar. (177-8)

The cellar in the Price house brings up his memory of the eight-year-old Ila, who played house with him under a table in the underground room at Tridib's old family house in Raibajar, and images of the nine-year-old Tridib and of Mr. Price, called Snipe, in memories "handed down" through stories. The "remembered forms," the ghosts present through memories, were "not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance – for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time" (178).

The narrator's act of conjuring up ghosts as the "past as present" seems to fall into a nostalgic move to turn toward a past, which acquires the status of authenticity through its absence, when he insists that there is "something truer" in the London he imagined through Tridib's stories. When the narrator visits London in 1981, the old London and the contemporary London are overlaid through his recollections of what Tridib told him about his visit to London in 1939. To the eyes of the narrator who has seen the streets in his invention built on Tridib's stories, the transformed landscape is unrecognizable:

I still could not believe in the truth of what I did see: the gold-green trees, the old lady walking her Pekingese, the children who darted out of a house and ran to the postbox at the corner... despite the clear testimony of my eyes, it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown me something truer about Solent Road a long time ago

in Calcutta, something I could not have seen had I waited at that corner for years.

(56)

The narrator's picture of England "in her finest hour" is drawn from Tridib's story of Alan Tresawsen, who was working with the Left Book Club to edit the Club's newsletter, and his intelligent friends at 44 Lymington Road in the summer of 1939. Ironically as a postcolonial subject, he looks nostalgically at the old England: "I wanted to know England not as *I* saw her, but in her finest hour – every place chooses its own, and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in a war" (57).

Tridib's London, reconstructed through his retrospection, is not simply a place of imagined plenitude set in the pre-Second World War England of his childhood. It is true that the house Tresawsen and his friends lived is idealized in Tridib's mind: "In one part of his mind that house figured as a bright, pure world, a world built on belief." Yet Tridib is not unaware that the conjured image in his mind is seductive due to "an illusion of knowledge created by a deceptive weight of remembered detail" and that the pure world has room for "tawdriness" (66) in the form of dirty bathtubs and shared bedrooms to be real. What holds up his nostalgic memory is his longing for the intense perception of life that can be experienced when faced with the reality of an impending war:

The fact that they *knew*; that even walking down that street, that evening, they knew what was coming – not the details, nor the timing perhaps, but they knew, all four of them, that their world, and in all probability they themselves, would

not survive the war. What is the colour of that knowledge? Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not *knowable*: nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin. (66-7)

If the past is revisited as a utopian image in Tridib's self-conscious nostalgia, it is also marked with the limits of his imagination; Tridib, fascinated with "moments in time that are not knowable," gaps in his romanticized narrative of the intelligent circle in the pre-war time England, would return to the point of time repeatedly in despair of the ultimate incomprehensibility of the past.

Tridib's emphasis on the gaps in his memory points to the partial nature of our access to the past and the discursive nature of history which "endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice."²¹⁴ In the novel, it is put in contrast with Ila's view of history. When the narrator, revisiting the site of Tridib's memory, tells Ila and Nick of how Alan and one of his friends died when the house was bombed by Germans, Ila responds with certainty: "They must have been wonderfully happy in that house." The narrator wonders at Ila's "arrogance" in believing that "her experience could encompass other moments simply because it had come later; that times and places are the same because they happen to look alike, like airport lounges" (101). With her historical perspective that assumes the homogeneity of time and space, Ila repeats the Europe-centered view:

²¹⁴ De Certeau. 36.

I know, for example, that you've spent your whole life living safely in middle-class suburbs in Delhi and Calcutta. You can't know what this kind of happiness means: there's a joy merely in knowing that you're a part of history. We may not achieve much in our little house in Stockwell, but we know that in the future political people everywhere will look to us – in Nigeria, India, Malaysia, wherever. It must have been the same for Tresawsen and his crowd. At least they knew they were a part of the most important events of their time – the war, and fascism, all the things you read about today in history books. That's why there's a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths; that's why they're remembered and that's why you've led us here. You wouldn't understand the exhilaration of events like that – nothing really important ever happens where you are. (102)

She adopts the dominant view of history with her confidence in the centrality of her experience and dismisses the “silence of voiceless events in a backward world” (102).

Ila's distinction of what is only local and what is of global importance reveals a view of culture built on binary oppositions: “Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters... But those are local things, after all – not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered.” This is ironical because, in her search for freedom, she posed as a cultural rebel against patriarchal authority and the standard of decency and modesty when she insisted on dancing at a night club against Robi's objection. What is missing in her view

of history is the question of place that challenges the conception of an empty and homogeneous historical time in the West-centered narrative of history: the narrator observes, “as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all” (21).

Ghosh addresses “spatialization” as a question of representation in relation to the problematic of otherness in rewriting the narrative of nation as a story of and about borders in the novel. What meets the eyes of the narrator in the postimperial capital is the figures of colonial others infiltrating its social and cultural landscape to unsettle its unity and identity. While the narrator upholds the truth of his imaginary Solent Road over the contemporary reality, this presence of immigrants on his imaginary landscape threatens the nostalgic narratives upheld by him and Tridib.²¹⁵ It is ironic that the narrator finds an Indian shop on the Brick Lane where Alan lived with his friends:

I had no means of recognizing the place I saw; it did not belong anywhere I had ever been. I walked ahead of Ila and Nick in a trance, looking at the Bengali neon signs above the shops that lined the lane, staring into display windows lined with the latest Bengali film magazines, reading the posters that had been slapped on those walls of aged London brick – stern grey anti-racism posters issued by an iridescent spectrum of the left-wing, buried now under a riot of posters advertising the very newest Hindi films – listening to quick exchanges in a dozen dialects of Bengali as people hurried past me, laughing and chattering, with their

²¹⁵ Sen. 49.

fingers curled into the sleeves of their anoraks, like shoppers at Gariahat on a cold winter's morning. ...Exactly like that sweet-shop at the corner of Gole Park, she said, isn't it. And so it was, with exactly the same laminated counters and plastic tables; exactly the same except that it was built into a terrace of derelict eighteenth-century London houses, and there was no paan-shop at the corner, and no Nathu Chaubey, but instead, as Nick pointed out, hanging over it was the great steeple of Hawksmoor's Christchurch Spitalfields. (98)

The eclectic sight of things from different times and spaces merged together disrupts the identity and continuity of place in the postimperial nation. The landscape of London in 1981 reveals an intrusion of otherness, brought by the postcolonial flow of migration, which disrupts the spatial identity of the city as structured in the frame of historicism: an Indian sweet-shop, which is likely to be found around Gole Park, a place located in the periphery of the middle-class neighborhood in Calcutta, is built into abandoned eighteenth-century houses over which the Anglican church located on the border of the City of London can be viewed.

Through the irregular landscape, the novel shows "how a place on the map is also a place in history."²¹⁶ Ghosh's story of the border in *The Shadow Lines* presents the place on an internal periphery as a site marked by spatial alterities which have been suppressed or erased in the narrative of modern progress represented by the Empire. On the street, ruins of buildings in the process of decay are mixed with shops of Indian

²¹⁶ Rich. 220.

immigrants. The history of a building with a sign that reads London Jamme Masjid gives a glimpse into the story of others in a marginal place: a Huguenot chapel built in 1743 became a synagogue and now a mosque with a new influx of Bengali immigrants to the area.

The ruin also figures in the novel as a site in which it is possible to dream of transcending the boundaries of identity. Tridib, “an expert on ruins,” longs to go beyond the limits of history with his archaeological imagination: “one could never know anything except through desire, real desire... a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places” (29). Ghosh examines the theme of freedom here again with Tridib’s longing for “a time and space that transcends the limits drawn by the geo-political ordering of world events.”²¹⁷

The love story of Tristan, which crystallizes Tridib’s desire for freedom, connects the novel’s characters, separated by the gap of time, as Benjaminian storytellers who transmit counsel in the form of story: Snipe telling the story to Tridib and May, Nick’s sister, during a German raid and then Tridib telling it to Ila and the narrator in the underground room in Raibajar.

It was an old story, the best story in Europe, Snipe said, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries – it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, Welsh in Wales,

²¹⁷ Gabriel. 47.

Cornish in Cornwall: it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas... (183)

In his letter to May, Tridib projects himself onto the figure of Tristan, a man without country, through his desire to meet her “far from their friends and relatives – in a place without a past, without history, free, really, free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers” (141). The statue of Queen Victoria in Calcutta, whose anomalous presence in the postcolonial city is “obscene” to May as a reminder of the British Empire, “an act of violence” (167), is a site in which Tridib feels it is possible to transgress the rigid divisions of identity. The ruin, a form of history disintegrated from the symbolic totality, provides a space for making different significations out of what remains. Tridib’s yearning for a place with no border “between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (29), Gabriel suggests, is a “wish to return to a shared historical experience, a larger cultural and historical collectivity than the rigid boundaries of nationalist ideology will now accommodate.”²¹⁸ In the novel’s narrative of memory as a story about borders, Tridib’s desire for a space without history can function “as critique and as utopian hope”²¹⁹: the nostalgic longing is a projection of the desire for a time and place different from the present condition.

²¹⁸ Gabriel. 47.

²¹⁹ Kaul. 142.

The novel questions the essentialist notions of cultural belonging by foregrounding the ideas of home as “unheimlich”²²⁰ and of geographical disorientation. Travelling is a main motif in a novel divided into two sections, named “Going Away” and “Coming Home,” each of which features a principal journey: Tridib’s journey to England in 1939 in the first section and the narrator’s grandmother Tha’mma’s journey to Dhaka in 1964 in the second. And these journeys recounted by the narrator as Tridib told or as he recollects are juxtaposed with his present-time journey to London in 1981 for his research. This motif of the journey problematizes the “paradigm of ‘roots,’ of fixity and stasis” and the idea of borderlines that support the conception of a culture with a stable center bounded in a territorial space in nationalist discourse.²²¹ Localizing a place based on relations of “dwelling” privileged over relations of travel involves relegating a culture’s external relations and displacements to the margins. James Clifford observes,

“Location,” here, is not a matter of finding a stable “home” or of discovering a common experience. Rather it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, “places,” or “histories” that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories like “Woman,” “Patriarchy,” or “colonization,” categories essential to political action as well as to serious comparative knowledge.

²²⁰ Bhabha. 10.

²²¹ Gabriel. 42.

“Location” is thus, concretely, a *series* of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces.²²²

A place, reconceptualized based on relations of travel, is not defined through boundaries in the sense of divisions; the outside is itself perceived as part of what constitutes the place in the conception of location as “a series of locations and encounters.”

The house in Dhaka with its absurd partition from the enmity between brothers, Tha'mma's father and uncle, is a synecdoche of the subcontinent:

They had all longed for the house to be divided when the quarrels were at their worst, but once it had actually happened and each family had moved into their own part of it, instead of the peace they had so much looked forward to, they found that a strange, eerie silence had descended on the house. It was never the same again after that; the life went out of it. (121)

With time, however, the partition wall becomes a part of them. The image of the “upside-down house” (123), which Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi made up, shows a “projection of alienness”²²³ and an “inversion of normality”²²⁴ based on the principle of binary division that is reflected in the process of constructing a nation. Tha'mma exposes the irony of borders when she wonders, while she is preparing for a trip to

²²² James Clifford. "Notes on Travel and Theory." *Inscriptions*. 5 (1989): 182.

²²³ Meenakshi. 262.

²²⁴ Gabriel. 44.

Dhaka, if “there’s something—trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land” (148)— that divides East Pakistan from India: “What was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn’t something in between?” (149)

Reflecting on Tha’mma’s confusion when she says she could “come home to Dhaka” instead of saying “go to Dhaka,” the narrator observes:

Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement.
(150)

He suggests that Tha’mma’s nostalgic longing is not for the old house in Dhaka, but for a “fixed point” that will provide a stable center for geographical orientation. Her nostalgia for home is shattered when Dhaka, her birthplace which she calls “home,” turns out to be “unhomely.” The self and the other as mirror images are inversed: it is now the Muslim Dhaka in which Tha’mma is “the repudiated Hindu other of the Muslim self.” “Home” is not a homogenized space bounded by what is situated outside, but transformed into the split space of home/not-home.²²⁵

²²⁵ Gabriel. 49.

Ghosh, an Indo-Anglian writer, is one of the “alienated insiders”²²⁶ who, educated in Western standards and writing for postcolonial middle-class and “First-World” audiences, seek to rethink the relationship between identity, history, and nation by disrupting the binary oppositions of “us” and “them,” “inside” and “outside,” and “self” and “other.” Rushdie describes their perspective as a “stereoscopic vision,” which comes from their double position as “at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society.”²²⁷ *The Shadow Lines* rewrites history through interconnections between families across borders at different temporal and spatial points to unsettle the national boundaries of identity. The novel’s story about borders addresses the discursive nature of different subject positions while trying to refigure historical time and space from a “stereoscopic vision.” In other words, Ghosh does not simply valorize a diasporic and cosmopolitan perspective over a nationalist one, but attends to the limits of narrativization in different positions to detect possibilities for alternative significations.

Tridib’s family fits into the old sense of “cosmopolitan” associated with elitism and imperial privilege: his father, a diplomat, lives abroad away from home most of the time, spending only a couple of months in Calcutta, and his older brother, an economist for the UN, is also always away from home. Tridib’s father is rigorous about how he appears, so “whatever he wore, there was always a drilled precision about his clothes which seemed to suggest that he was not so much wearing them as putting them on parade” (34). According to “his own promotion scheme for the world” (41), he classifies

²²⁶ Sen. 47.

²²⁷ Rushdie. 19.

people and prepares a set speech for a conversation. Carrying his own scheme and classification system with him, he is comfortable wherever he goes in the world.

Tham'ma calls Tridib's father the "Shaheb," a word used when addressing a European of social status: he is described as "so Europeanised that his hat wouldn't come off his head" (34). The Shabeb's wife Mayadebi, called Queen Victoria, with her "pukka" accent and her insistence on talking to her Sri Lankan servant, Lizzy, as if she were a child provides a "curious caricature of the parent/child dialectic established by the colonial powers." An example of colonial mimicry, she shows an implicit subversion of the imperial presence of the British queen.²²⁸

With his "travelled" eyes, Tridib is rather an "alienated insider" on the boundary of his middle-class subject position. The narrator hints at Tridib's intentional detachment from communal ties:

He did not seem to want to make friends with the people he was talking to, and that perhaps was why he was happiest in neutral, impersonal places – coffee houses, bars, street-corner addas – the sort of places where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further. That was also why he chose to come all the way from Ballygunge to Gole Park for his addas – simply because it was far enough for him to be sure that he wouldn't meet any of his neighbors there. (9)

²²⁸ Sen. 49.

Even seen as the “paradigmatic figure of migrancy and hybridity,”²²⁹ he is at the center of the narrator’s discovery of how his quest for the forgotten memories of the riots leads to a story about borders as shadow lines haunting the interconnected families in Calcutta and London. Idealized and romanticized by the narrator, however, Tridib is also subject to the shadows of colonial legacies as his relationship with May reveals his desire for complete identification with the imperial center.

The anonymous narrator in a mirror relationship with other characters, his consciousness mediates and frames other voices and stories, but as Kaul puts it, “some of these voices speak in a counterpoint with his narrative” to make the reader interrogate his telling of the story.²³⁰ The novel’s intermixing of different temporal and spatial points through the act of remembering brings moments of irony into the narrative of memory. After Tridib’s telling of the story of Tristan, “a man without a country,” follows the scene in which Ila tells the narrator how she discovered Nick, now her husband, was having an affair with someone. Nick, who wishes to travel around the world like his grandfather Lionel Tresawsen, is now living dependent on his Indian father-in-law, while Ila finds herself in “the squalor of the genteel little lives she had so much despised” (185). Ila and Nick remain subject to “other people’s inventions.” Ila’s “free woman” image is revealed to be “a construct of both her own and the narrator’s imaginations”²³¹: to the narrator’s taunting remark that she is paying back for her promiscuous past, Ila responds, “You see, you’ve never understood, you’ve always been

²²⁹ Roy. 41.

²³⁰ Kaul. 143.

²³¹ Sen. 52.

taken in by the way I used to talk, when we were in college. I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow” (184).

The novel’s narrative of memory, read as the narrator’s story of growth, is marked by a gap between the young narrator, who looks up to Tridib for his imagination, and the matured one conscious of the limits of his “tidy late-bourgeois world, the world that I had inherited.” Rao suggests that Ghosh’s novel presents the dilemma of postcoloniality: “a dilemma that is marked by a rejection of older forms of nationalism on the one hand and an apprehension of a global order dominated by the West on the other.”²³² The dilemma is rather refigured in the novel whose narrative of memory as an allegory of modernity engages with demystifying the symbolic network of ideas while creating a national imaginary through the narrator’s “journey into a land of looking-glass events.” The real returns on the margins of discourse or “in its rifts and crannies”: what must be forgotten to make a representation intelligible should come back “in order for a new identity to become thinkable.”²³³

If the narrator is presented as “a firmly placed character”²³⁴ with his middle class and male perspective, the geography of Calcutta as imagined in the novel is marked by an invisible borderline of class. The narrator’s depiction of the house of a cousin, a refugee from Dhaka, in Garia shows a view of life outside the finery of urban middle-class households. A place of otherness within the city, or a spatial alterity, which

²³² Rao. 105.

²³³ De Certeau. 105.

²³⁴ Meenakshi. 259.

unsettles the idea of homogeneous spatial order, it serves as a reminder of the need to hold on to the moral standards of gentility and self-discipline.

I went willingly: I was already well schooled in looking away, the jungle-craft of gentility. But still, I could not help thinking it was a waste of effort to lead me away. It was true, of course, that I could not see that landscape or anything like it from my own window, but its presence was palpable everywhere in our house; I had grown up with it. It was that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother's voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn't study hard I would end up over *there*, that the only weapon people like us had was our brains and if we didn't use them like claws to cling to what we'd got, that was where we'd end up, marooned in that landscape: I knew perfectly well that all it would take was a couple of failed examinations to put me where our relative was, in permanent proximity to that blackness: that landscape was the quicksand that seethed beneath the polished floors of our house; it was that sludge which gave our genteel decorum its fine edge of frenzy. (132)

The marginal place in the city, the sludge on the edge of gentility, harbors "anonymous others that displace the national imaginary created by the narrative voice and the mirror images that surround it."²³⁵

²³⁵ Sen. 53-4.

The novel revisits the traumatic site of memory in Dhaka as a ‘knot of meanings,’ that is, a traumatic point, a non-symbolized real, which resists the process of constituting the meaning of the unspoken retrospectively, of retroactive working through, elaboration of the past.²³⁶ Tridib’s death at the hands of the rioting mob in Dhaka is an event susceptible to more than one version of account in White’s terms.²³⁷ The narrator does not reconstruct in his own words what happened after Tridib and his company including Tha’mma came out to leave in a car followed by her uncle Jethamosai on a rickshaw, but lets Robi and May tell their accounts in their own voices. After recounting the moment he relives through his nightmarish dream once in a while, Robi, now a Civil Service officer, tells the narrator about anonymous notes he receives threatening his life after he gives his orders to kill the whole village if necessary in the name of freedom. On the notes he recognizes a reflection of his orders: “It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror” (241). As the narrator creates a national imaginary through mirror images and events in his story of borders, Robi also discovers a “spectral contact zone” formed by an invisible borderline, the “phantom border of the mirror” that divides people into opposing sides and binds them in the cycle of identification. The recognition of this spectral contact zone reveals the shadow lines of internal borders that run across the national borders and challenges the authority of ordering in the map as the universal signifier of the modern nation-state system. Robi

²³⁶ Žižek. 56.

²³⁷ See White 20-21.

argues that the “thousand little lines” dividing the land into different sects are “a mirage,” but Tridib’s death in a communal riot proves the materiality of these borders.²³⁸

On the last day of the narrator’s stay in London, May looks back on the horrible moment when the mob went after the rickshaw: Tridib came out of the car at her shout and ran towards the rickshaw to rescue Jethasmosai only to be killed by the mob. She admits to her naivety in acting like a heroine and accusing others of being cowardly when everyone else but her knew what would happen. May’s concluding remark shows that she finds her saving grace by reading Tridib’s act as a sacrifice: “For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn’t kill him; I couldn’t have, if I’d wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can’t understand it, I know I mustn’t try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery” (246).

What is ironical is that imperial authority exerts its power even in this moment of irrational violence: May points out she was safe because the mob wouldn’t have touched an English memsahib. Then, what did Tridib give himself up for? The moment Tridib ran towards the rickshaw overlaps with the moment Alan Tresawsen threw his body under a falling beam to save Francesca, a German woman he loved. If Tridib’s act at the moment makes him live the intense perception of life he has longed to know in his nostalgic memory, the irony is that the borderline of identity marks or mocks the postcolonial subject’s existential act of freedom.

Reading Tridib’s act as a sacrifice provides May and the narrator with “a final redemptive mystery” (246): it is redemptive since it helps them work through the

²³⁸ Rao. 110.

traumatic moment, but remains a mystery since it weaves this final unknowability into the novel's narrative of memory. Snipe, Tridib, and the narrator who is writing the story, all Benjaminian storytellers, transmit a story with the "layers of a variety of retellings" and leave traces of their own imaginations "the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel."²³⁹ The mystery of the unknowable moment is then "redemptive" in the sense that it invites the reader to return to gaps and silences in the story in search for different cultural significations. It is redemptive as the process of retelling the story with one's own imagination turns the past as present into the "past as to come."

²³⁹ Benjamin. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." 92-3.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

“Difference relates.”

- Fredric Jameson

Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* address the legacies of British Empire in revisiting modern history in reaction to the postmodern symptom of historical amnesia. The novels retrieve the stories of those who have been lost or forgotten in official history while rethinking the temporal and spatial imaginary projected in the modern narrative of progress. In Swift's *Waterland*, Tom Crick retells his personal and familial story intertwined with local history as history lessons to his class of postmodern youth in fear of the end of history. In the process of reconstructing the local history of the Fens as an allegory of national and imperialist progress, Tom attempts to refigure sites of memory as internal peripheries. In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai rewrites the post-Independence history of India in its struggle with colonial legacies and traditional beliefs through complex webs of genealogies he weaves through reminiscences. The heterogeneous stories of people recounted in scraps of memory challenge the contemporaneity of national space and counteract the sense of fatalism that comes from the linear story of becoming, both personal and national, as a story of failed adulthood. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* retraces fragments of the past to uncover layers of silences around traumatic sites in personal and national history. In quest for the forgotten

memories of the riots, the narrator writes a story of borders as shadow lines haunting interconnected families and lives in London and Calcutta and in Dhaka and Calcutta, cities located across imperial or national borders. The novel revisits a traumatic site of memory as a ‘knot of meanings’ through which different versions of stories are recounted.

These postmodern historical novels examine history as a discourse and explore its limits by focusing on the act of remembering and narrativizing the past as an attempt to give a certain order or structure from a particular perspective. The narrators of the novels are engaged with an autobiographical act of rewriting their lives, but their effort to reconstitute themselves in unity and continuity is undermined by the disjunctive narrative form of the novels. Thus the novels expose the discursive nature of the stories recounted by the narrators.

In the novels, the function of the reader is textualized as a listener of the stories recounted. While this is related to the novels’ concern with storytelling, it works as a device to draw the reader into the narrative by making the act of listening or reading part of the narrative. Linda Hutcheon points out that postmodernism is concerned with the “site of internalized challenge”²⁴⁰ against the transcendental challenge of traditional oppositional ideologies positioned outside of what they challenge. The paradoxical move of the postmodern return to history is part of the postmodernist practice of contesting the prevailing ideology but with a self-reflexive acknowledgement of being implicated in that ideology. The postmodernist emphasis on the provisional nature of truth and

²⁴⁰ Hutcheon. 209.

textuality shows a critical awareness that there is no guaranteed site of challenge within a cultural text itself; problematizing can be performed in the relationship between reader and text. Thus, textualizing the reader in the postmodernist historical fiction can be viewed as a device for reading as an activity of both sympathetic engagement with and critical distance from the narrative presented. As with Brecht's notion of epic theater, the reader of the novels is invited to participate in a critical and analytic activity by engaging with what is criticized both from inside and outside the text.

In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie remarks that Indian writers in England have "a kind of double perspective," that is, being "at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society."²⁴¹ Although he is linking this "stereoscopic vision" to the status of physical alienation, it is shared by postmodern writers as a sense of cultural displacement. This mode of thinking can be traced back to the 'sagittal' relation to one's own present, the mode of reflective relation to the present, suggested in Foucault's critical reinterpretation of Kant's text on Enlightenment. Foucault's idea of the reflective mode of thinking as "work on our limits" makes a space of critical distance from one's own present within the time of modernity. It is a move to place a space of and for otherness within the present time conceived of in homogeneous uniformity in the narrative of progress.

Postmodern historical novels make a critical approach to the Empire and colonial legacies by introducing the question of place into the critical mode of reflecting on "our limits." Their effort to rewrite modern history while questioning its totalizing conception

²⁴¹ Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. 19.

of time and space from a heterological perspective necessarily leads to questioning the symbolic representation of the Empire or the nation as what holds events in a coherent order as the center. The layered narrative of memory through which the novels reconstruct modern history is allegorical in the double sense that it exposes the act of signification by de-centering the symbol of the transcendental signifier while telling an allegorical story of personal and familial history intertwined with public history. The spectral presence of colonial others haunts traumatic sites of memory which figure as ruins or places that reveal the limit of narrativization in the form of gaps in the symbolic network of history.

A sense of longing permeates the act of looking backward in these novels focused on the act of remembering. The postmodern attempt to recover alternate histories of marginalized groups is paradoxical in that it occurs at the very moment when historical alternatives are said to be in the process of disappearing as a result of the advance of new global space. In this context, Jameson argues, it becomes important to pose the question of Utopia as “a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all.”²⁴² The postmodern revisions of history have a Utopian dimension, not in the sense that they envision a future with certain positive forms and shapes as in the existing literature of Utopianism or that they subject the past and the present to a teleological movement toward a future. The Utopian in postmodernism is characterized as the production of a “concept” of space: the production of a new kind of mental entity but without any kind of positive representation of that entity. It is detected as non-

²⁴² Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*. xvi.

figurative forms of anticipations and impulses that arise from the mobile and constantly modified configurations of what has been left open for different readings in the text.

The fragments of story-forms, styles or genres put together in postmodern texts present choices for possible interpretations. For this constellation of different possibilities and choices without a centered organic sequence, Jameson suggests the proposition of “difference relates.”²⁴³ In the act of looking back while being caught by the wind of progress, the angel of history in the postmodern narrative of memory is not nostalgic for the imagined golden days of the past as a time of plenitude, but in search of possibilities for alternative paths buried under the carpet of history and forgotten in the name of necessity. The postmodernist narratives of memory in the novels, thus, turn the time of the now into a time for the “past as to come,” a time to detect the unrealized and unfulfilled possibilities of the past.

²⁴³ Ibid. 31.

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